THE PANTHEON OF OUR ANCESTORS

LEOPOLD WEBER

BERSERKER
BOOKS

The Pantheon of Our Ancestors

by Leopold Weber

Asgard, the world of the gods of our ancestors.

Part One: The Creation.....9–20

1. Introduction.....9–12

   Agir, the sea giant, and his wife Ran — The storm eagle Leichenschwelg — Giants and trolls — The Norns.

2. Prehistory.....12–15

   The World Abyss — The Primordial Mountains rise from the Abyss — The realm of fire, Muspellheim, blazes forth — The primordial giant Hmir, the Brilliant One, and his lineage in the depths of the Abyss — Audumla, the Heavenly Cow, above the glacier — The Aesir Bur emerges from the Primordial Mountains — Bestla, daughter of Umi, the "Binder," becomes Bur's wife — Bur's sons, Odin, Wile, and We, slay Imir.

3. The Work of the Gods.....15–20

   Heaven, Earth, and Sea are born from Tmir's body and blood — The Universe and its beings: Giants, dwarves, spirits, elves, and albs — Humans — The world-ash Yggdrasil — Nidhogg, the greedy dragon — The Norns: Urd, Verdandi, Skuld — Bifröst, the bridge of the gods — The home of the gods, Asgard.

Part Two: The Aesir.....20–40

1. Odin, the Lord of Heaven.....20–24

   Odin's home Valhalla — Odin, the god of battle with Gungnir, the spear, on the gray steed Sleipnir, the glider — His shield maidens, the Valkyries, and the heroes of Valhalla, the Einherjar — Odin on the high seat in Valhalla; his ring of power, Draupnir, the Dripper; his wolves, Geri and Freki; his messengers, the ravens Hugin and Munin — Odin, the Wodan of the Germanic peoples.

2. Frigg, the Lady of Heaven.....25–27
Frigg's home and her handmaidens: Gesjun, the Chaste; Fülln, the chest-keeper; Gna, the messenger; Hlin, the protector of mankind; Losn, the intercessor; Snotra, the strict; War, the keeper of oaths—Saga, the song-knower, Odin's friend.

3. Thor, the god of thunder.....27–30
Jörð, his mother, the earth giantess — Thor: the slayer of the Thurses and friend of mankind — His thunderhammer Mjölnir, the Malmer, and his team of horses — Thor in Thrudwang, the realm of strength: his wife Sif, the fierce one; his daughter Thrud and his servants: Thjalfi, the Swift, and Röskwa, the industrious maid — Thor, the Donar of the Saxons — Thor's sons Magni and Modi.

4. Tyr, the Sword-Wielder.....30–32
Tyr's father: the ice giant Hymir — His mother: the All-Golden One — Tyr: the Sky Lord Ziu of the Germanic peoples — Tyr and the World-Wolf Fenrir.

5. Heimdall, the Sky-watcher.....32–37
Heimdall rides out of the sea on Goldzopf, the steed — Himinbjörg, Heimdall's stronghold — Heimdall watches at the head of the Bridge of the Gods, the Gjallarhorn above him in the bower of the World Ash — Heimdall establishes the estates: servants, peasants, and princes.

6. The younger generation of the Aesir.....37–40
Bragi, the singer, and his wife Idun, the mistress of the golden apples —Widar, the avenger, in the pastureland of Midi—Bal, the Light-bringer: the guardian of justice—His home, Far-glow—Raima, his wife, the daughter of Nep—Hermod, the messenger of the gods, and Höd, the blind one, the harbinger of doom.

Part Three: The Vanir.....41–53

1. A New Race of Gods.....41–42
How the Vanir came to be — Gullweig, the Golden Flood, the Vanir sorceress — The Aesir mistreat Gullweig — The Vanir's battle with the Aesir and their reconciliation.

2. Freyer, the Bestower of Blessings.....42–48

The Realm of the Light Elves — Frey's cloud-ship Skidbladnir, his horse Goldmähre, and Gullinbursti, the golden-bristled boar — Skirnir, Frey's messenger, woos Gerd, the daughter of the glacier giant Gymir, on his behalf — The Yule-evening — Frey, the Joy of the Germans.

3. Freyr's Clan.....48–53

Freyja, Frey's sister, the protector of lovers: the lady of the German men — Bolkwang, the field of Bolts: her seat — Freyja's necklace Brisingamen, her falcon-cloak, the cat-chariot — Njörd, the sea god, her father — Njörd and his second wife Skadi, the daughter of the storm giant Thjazi — Njörd's first wife from primeval times and the blood sacrifices — Hönir, the seer.

Part Four: The Servants of the Gods.....53–57

1. Divine Beings.....53–55

Night and day—Mani, the driver of the moon, and Sol, the mistress of the sun—summer and winter, the sons of the air giants Swasud and Windswal.

2. Divine Beasts.....55–57

Audumla, the Heavenly Cow — Heidrun, the Heavenly Goat — The divine steeds — Frey's golden-bristled boar — Eikthyrnir, the cloud stag on Valhalla's roof — Gullinkambi, the golden-crested heavenly rooster, and his brothers in Jötunheim and with Hel.

Part Five: The Flame Maidens.....57–83

1. Loki, the Blazer.....57–62

Loki's parents: the weather giant Farbauti and Laufey-Njal, the island goddess — Loki, the foster brother of the Aesir — Loki's schemes: Loki steals Freyja's necklace, Heimdall's sword, and robs Sif of her hair — Loki wins

several

gifts for the gods from the dwarves: Iwaldi's sons forge the golden hair-braid for Sif, Frey's airship Skidbladnir, and Gungnir, Odin's spear; Brokk and Sindri create Frey's golden boar, Odin's ring of power, and Thor's thunderhammer — Loki's brood by the nymph Angrboda, the harbinger: the Midgard Serpent; Fenrir, the World Wolf; Hel, the goddess of death.

2. Surt, the Black One.....63

Surt, lord of Fireheim, waits at the border of Muspellheim for the end of the world.

Part Six: The Deeds of Thor.....64–105

1. Thor, the Lightning-Bringer.....64–70

How Thrym, the ruler of Thurfe, stole Thor's hammer, and how Thor regained it.

2. Thor's Retinue.....70–73

How Thor gathered his retinue from the farmer Egil at the end of the world.

3. At Geirrød.....73–78

Thor seeks revenge on Geirröd, the glacier giant.

4. The Giant's Brewing Cauldron.....78–85

Thor retrieves the brewing cauldron from Hymir, the giant of the icy sea, for the feast of the Aesir at Agir.

5. Thor's Wounding.....85–92

Thor's adventure with the rock giant Hrungnir.

6. The Dwarf King's Wedding Procession 92–96

How Alwis, the dwarf, was tricked.

7. Thor Beyond the World.....96–105

Thor Beyond the World.

Part Seven: Odin's Wades.....105–116

1. Odin's Eye.....103–107

How Odin gave up his eye to Mimir, the water spirit, in exchange for wisdom.

2. In the battle of words.....107–108

The contest of knowledge with the giant Wafthrudnir—Madness.

3. The Sacrifice.....109

Odin sacrifices and redeems himself.

4. The Lord of Terror.....109–111

Odin-Bgg, the Lord of Terror, and King Geirröd, the Wicked One.

5. The Mead of the Gods.....111–116

Odin obtains Odrörir, the drink of the gods.

Part Eight: The End of the World.....116–126

1. The Breach of the Gods' Oath.....116–118

The Giant Tree-Carver and Loki's Betrayal — Freyja Sold — Loki in the form of a mare — The breach of oath.

2. The Downfall.....118–119

Loki sires the Midgard Serpent, Fenrir, and Hel with the harbinger Angrboda — Loki abducts Idun, the keeper of the golden apples — The gods grow old — The age of strife and discord dawns.

3. Balder's Death.....120–124

Ominous dreams—Odin in the underworld with the Wala—Frigg implores all beings to spare Balder—The mistletoe shoot —Loki and Höd—Balder's death—Balder's burial—Hermod, the messenger of the gods, with Hel—Frigg begs all beings for tears to redeem Balder from Helheim — The giantess "Ungrateful."

4. The gods' judgment on Loki.....124–126

Loki's mockery — The punishment — Sigyn, his wife, the faithful one.

Part Nine: Ragnarök, the Fall of the Gods.....126–129

The Time of Terror — The Violent Winter — The Uprising of the Fiends — The Rifts — The Midgard Serpent — The Army of the Dead — The Sun and Moon Wolves — Surt, the Lord of Flames, and His Sons — Fenrir, the World Wolf — The Final Battle — The End of the World.

Part Ten: The Rebirth.....129–131

The New World — Balder, Lord of Heaven, and His Brothers in Gimle, the Hall of Gems — Hönir, the Seer — The Fall of Nidhogg, the Dragon — Conclusion.

On a stormy winter night, the Norwegian chieftain Hakon sat before the open fire in his living quarters, the great hall: wearing a house robe of fine white wool,
trimmed with blue braid, a wide belt with a silver buckle across his hips, his woollen stockings wrapped with leather straps up to the knees. His hair fell freely in long waves down to his shoulders, held back only at the forehead by a blue ribbon.

On a stool before Hakon, the mighty bronze blade of his battle-axe glinted. He held the wooden handle in his left hand and, bent over it by the light of the bright flame, carved sacred symbols into it with his knife—symbols meant to bring him luck in battle: the "runes," that is, the letters signifying the name of the god of war, "Tyr." Beside him stood a ten-year-old boy with smooth blond hair and sparkling blue eyes. Hakon's sister had brought him to the chieftain to be raised by him, for her husband, the district prince, had only recently fallen on a military campaign in Sweden.

Outside, the ice in the fjord, the bosom of the sea, was cracking and popping: it stretched deep into the mountains, right up to Hakon's house and farm.

"Uncle," asked the boy, "what's that banging out there?"

Hakon set down the axe handle and listened.

"It's Ran, the wild one," he said.

"Who is Ran, Uncle?"

"Ägir is a giant, lord of all the sea waters; his wife is named Ran. Ägir is of immense stature. His long hair is dark green like the reeds that grow on the beach, and

his beard is dark green too; it hangs down to his hips. His eyes are blue. Most of the time they shine as kindly as the sea when it lies smooth and the sun shines on it. But when he gets angry, they sparkle darkly like the steel of a blade. He lives in a vast hall at the bottom of the sea, made of clear glass. Instead of fire, gold glows there from the ceiling and the walls, and the floor, too, is of glowing gold. When the sun sets in the water in the evening, you can see it shining from the bottom yourself. In summer, when the weather is clear and the sea is calm, Ägir rises from the water and basks among the rocks, where it is warmest. Then you can sometimes hear him laughing softly from the shore, but when you look, you see no one; for when Ägir hears human footsteps, he dives quickly back into the waves. His wife Ran, however, is evil: her hair stands in thick tufts from her head, and her eyes glint grimly and green. It is Ran who stirs up the sea, so that the waves crash and roar. And when the ships of men are shattered in the storm, she dances with joy at the bottom of the sea and casts out her net, drawing the shipwrecked down to her so they cannot be saved. Now, in winter, the water in the fjord has frozen over; she is angry and wants to break it: with her giant head, she rams the ice. There's a loud crash."

A gust of wind blew through the skylight at the gable, driving the smoke back into the hall, and the mountain wind howled and roared so that the walls of the house shook.

The women on the bench at the back of the hall let out a soft cry. The boy grabbed Hakon by the sleeve.

"What is that, Uncle? Does it mean us harm?"

"Hush, Erik, hush!" whispered the old maid from behind, "don't call them, the fiends, at night! If you call them, they'll be standing behind you before you know it!"

The boy looked behind him. Chieftain Hakon threw back his head.

“Don’t listen to women’s nonsense, Erik! If you want to learn to fear, you’d be better off stopping living right now. Out on the sea, when you sail out in the dragon ship to the Hccren, that’s when you’ll first hear the winds howling that the storm giant drives out—unlike here in the hall!”

“What is the Storm Giant’s name, Uncle?”

“Hräswelg, Leichenschwelg is his name, for he has already turned many living people into corpses. He crouches at the end of the world; he has an eagle’s head with a sharp beak and fiercely flashing eyes, and instead of arms, mighty wings.”

“Are there other giants, Uncle?” The

servant at the door laughed.

“That wasn’t a smart question, Erik! Everyone knows that: the rabble lurks everywhere where it’s desolate! The mountain giants, the Thursen and Trotte, in the rocky cliffs with their stone heads: one of them often has three or four such stone heads at once, and they swing whole oak trunks like clubs in their hairy fists. If they catch a human, that’s the end of him: they devour him skin and hair, along with his clothes. And even bigger and worse are the ice giants far to the east, and especially in the north, on the islands in the sea where the sun doesn’t shine all winter, and monstrous icebergs float in the water.”

“Are the giants stronger than the strongest men, Grandfather?”

“The giants are certainly much stronger.”

“Are the giants as strong as the gods?”

“The gods are stronger,” said Hakon. But then he looked down at the ground and muttered to himself in a low voice: “They still are! May they remain so forever, and may the gods never succumb in battle against the fiends!”

“Why are you speaking so softly, Grandfather? I cannot understand you. Who is the strongest in the world, Grandfather?”

“Stronger than men and giants, and even stronger than the gods, is almighty Fate. All must submit to it.”

“Who is that: Fate?”

“It is what is destined for all people in life.”

“And who determines it, Grandfather?”

“I do not know,” said Hakon, gazing into the distance, “Our bards and seers do not know either. Once, in primeval times—as the gods sat drinking strong drink and playing with golden dice—three mighty women came striding from the north: they spin the fabric of the world’s fate with mighty hands. But no one knows who commands them.”

“Must you die someday too, Uncle?”

“Of course I must die, Erik. And you, too, will die one day, just as my father died, and my father’s father, and my forefather.”

“And who was before the ancestor, Grandfather?”

"There was the great-grandfather, boy: Hakon, the Thunder Bear. And before him was Skuli, the Lightning Spear."

“And was there always someone before him?”

The servants laughed. Erik glared at them angrily.

“Why are they laughing, Uncle?”

“Because they don’t understand!” Hakon muttered to himself:

> Servants pant their way through life in sorrow; food and drink are their solace.
> The soul of the ruler thirsts for knowledge, The lord hungers for wisdom!

“No, Erik,” he said aloud, “once upon a time, there were no humans; there were only gods and giants. And before that, there was a time when there were only giants. And at the very beginning, there was no one at all.”

“What was there then, Grandpa?”

“The world was empty, boy, silent and dark, a monstrous abyss, high and deep, far and wide without end. There was no sky above, no earth below. Then there was a thunderous roar, and in the north, a monstrous wall of ice rose from the darkness with

jagged snow-capped peaks. There the frost cracked, and storms howled from it. Far to the south, however, a glow shone as if from a vast conflagration: there the realm of fire, Muspellheim, roared and blazed in the darkness. Sparks crackled from the mighty flames; sparks as large as the sun and moon, and tiny sparks in swarms with them like the stars in the sky, they whizzed and whirled over the empty abyss, so that the darkness flashed all around, all the way to the ice wall. And where they swept through, their heat radiated down through the air. Then the primeval ice began to crack on the glaciers: it shattered into crevasses, a torrent of water gushed from the interior of the grim glaciers, and streams, billowing with poisonous vapors, thundered down everywhere into the dark depths. There it was still as cold as before. There the roaring waters below froze solid once more, and a massive lump grew ever mightier from the plunging streams. And as the warmth from above gradually penetrated down there as well, the immense lump began to stir: a blocky head emerged. Arms and legs, and in the abyss sat Pmir, the Brill-ier, grim and cold as the glaciers, wild as the mountain stream. So it is said in the song:

> Before all else was Pmir, the Ancient One,
> Before the earth and sand and the roaring sea!
> No earth below, no sky above: Only the abyss
> yawned in eternal gray."

"And what did he do there, Ohm?"

"He roared so that the whole abyss resounded, and when he had roared himself out, he tore open his maw and gulped down the water that plunged from the mountains into the abyss. Then he slept and snored so that the air trembled."

"Was there only Pmir in the world, Ohm?"

"Only Pmir was in the Abyss, the Fire Realm behind him and the Primordial Mountains above him. But once, while he slept, he began to sweat so that it poured out of his armpits like mist

. His armpits began to itch and tingle, and between his heavy thighs something began to crawl—and then they swarmed out of his lumpy body everywhere, like vermin on the great dung heap at the back of the yard: nasty children, boys and girls. They grew rapidly, though they were nowhere near as big as the primordial giant, their father, and they raged and roared about in the abyss. “Thursen,” they said to one another, meaning “the mighty ones,” or also “Jotuns,” the “devourers.”

Up above the ice wall, however, it grew ever warmer from the sputtering sparks, and the glaciers melted ever more rapidly. From the melting ice, mists rose and lay like a gray blanket close above them. Then it began to hum beneath the veil, as if the guard at the courtyard gate were softly blowing his horn at night. And as the mist parted in the wind, a tall horn gleamed from the steam in the glow of the sparkling sparks: Audumla, the mist-drenched one, stood above the glacier—the sacred Heavenly Cow!"

“Audumla,” murmured the servants reverently from the back of the hall, “praise be to you, nourishing mother of the world, comfort of the needy!”

“From Audumla’s overflowing udders, milk flowed into the abyss. Then the primeval giant roared below with greedy lust and tore open his maw, twice as wide! Audumla grew hungry: she licked the ice with her warm, broad, mighty tongue until it melted away and the rock emerged. It was covered all over with salt. And when Audumla had licked away the salt as well, it shimmered inside the rock, as if a light were about to dawn: a head with flowing hair rose from the stone, and, set free, Bur, the Aesir, the god, leaped out of the stony dungeon. His bright face shone through the darkness. With flashing eyes, he gazed into the abyss, where the fiends rolled about and roared. Angrily, he shook his head and thrust the clanging spear into the ground; he was displeased by what he saw there.

But there was one among the daughters of the giants who was unlike her sisters: she was beautifully formed, with long yellow hair reaching down to her ankles and a gentle face. Her name was Bestla, the Peacemaker, for she loved harmony and peace. She was sad in the cold and darkness; it was hard for her to dwell amid the raging and quarreling of the fiends. Then she saw a light shimmering up on the mountain: it was as if Bur, the god, had leaped from the rock. And, filled with longing, she climbed up out of the abyss. All around her, the mountain waters rushed from the greenish ice, and before her stood Bur with a radiant face. She went to meet him, and Bur wrapped his arms around her. Thus they became husband and wife. But their firstborn son was Odin."

“Odin!” Erik cheered, “that is our god, Uncle!”

“Odin is our god, Erik. The god of warriors and princes, the god of the singers who sing of battle glory, the lord of the heavens. The German men in the south call him Wodan. But there were no warriors or princes yet, nor was there a heaven. Then Odin resolved in his mind to create the world.

He consulted with his brothers: with Wile, the Bold, and the holy We. He seized his father's spear and hurled it at the primeval giant Hinir. Then Zmir roared and fell down dead. Blood gushed from his chest like a river and swelled into a roaring flood that swept everything stirring in the abyss down into its whirlpools.

Then Odin descended with his brothers and created the world from the chaotic turmoil in the abyss.

Nmirs’ flesh became the earth, his bones became stones, his foaming blood became the sea, and his mighty skull, high above all, became the vault of heaven. But dark and empty lay the lands beneath the immense skull. Only the small and large sparks from the fiery realm of Muspellheim whirled and rushed through the void, wild and senseless as fiery lightning.

Then the gods summoned them and restrained their frenzied flight. The wild tumult of sparks

in the sky: the sun shone, the moon and the stars, day and night came to be, and the seasons passed over the earth."

“So the world was finished, Grandpa?”

“The world was far from finished, Erik. The Earth still lay as a lump in the roaring torrent of blood, just as it had emerged from the body of the primordial giant: rock, rubble, and fertile soil all jumbled together. Then the gods shaped the Earth into a great, circular disc and anchored it in the world ocean that roared around it. Along the coasts all around, they piled up a mighty mountain wall from Pmir's bones. There, icy winds roared ceaselessly and poured snow and hailstones from the clouds over the bare slopes, until the peaks shone silver-white and glistening glaciers filled the valleys deep below. There the giants dwelled. There, in the wastelands of Thursenheim, they could rage and roar to their hearts' content. But they did not venture beyond, lest they destroy the earth.”

“But where did the giants come from? They were drowned in blood, weren't they?”

“Not all of them, Erik. One had saved himself in a boat with his wife : Bergelmir, Bear Roar. From him come the giants who live now... But the gods gathered all the good land and the smaller bone-like rocks in the middle of the earth's disc to form plains, valleys, and mountains, and the Giant Mountains enclosed it from the outside like a protective wall. They called this land Mittelgard, Midgard. And when the mighty spark-star from Muspellheim, the sun, shone upon it, it came to life. As the song says:

> The sons of Bur, the world-builders, rolled the
> land from the depths into radiant light,
> Then the sun shone shimmering upon the sea cliffs, Then
> the first green sprouted from the ground.

Plants sprouted everywhere, trees grew into cool, rustling forests. From the brown earth sprang

colorful creatures sprang forth, birds fluttered in the sunshine, and gleaming fish glided through the waters."

"Had the sun made all this?"

"The sun hadn't made it; it can't do that, Erik. But its rays had awakened the forces slumbering in the earth's depths; so the plants and animals pushed upward toward warmth and light. And with them swarmed all manner of creatures that had slept in the ground.

Bearded dwarves crawled out everywhere like maggots from the body of Pmir, the Earth. But the brightness hurt their squinting eyes, for they were accustomed to the darkness. So they slipped into the crevices and caves of the mountains.

The spirits of the earth and the waters awoke. In the springs and streams, in the hills and groves, everywhere their secret voices began to murmur and whisper. And in the air, swarms of light elves frolicked, small as children, with shining eyes and golden hair—so bright that they flashed and vanished like a fleeting glow. Only the dark black elves, the ghosts, remained crouched in the darkness beneath the ground; from there they crept secretly at night to the upper world and haunted it.

Then Odin descended from heaven to earth to behold his work, and with him two other gods: Hönir and Lodur. For the Aesir brothers had taken their sisters as wives, since there was no one else there, and there were now many of them, fathers and sons. Summer was just beginning, and the gods rejoiced at how everything was thriving: the lambs leaped merrily, the calves bleated in the meadows, and the birds sang joyfully from the skies. And yet it seemed to the gods that something was still missing. Then they saw two slender young saplings shimmering in the sunshine at the edge of the forest: Ask, the ash tree, and Embla, the elm. They stood firmly rooted in the ground, but their leaves rustled, and their tops leaned toward one another as if they wanted to whisper.

Then the gods cried out: "Let us make them into humans!"

Odin gave them breath, Hönir gave them spirit, Lodur gave them the light of life and radiant blood.

Then the little trees shook, their leaves fell from them, and two human children stood there with long hair that blew in the wind. Thus came the first human couple: Ask, the man, and Embla, the woman.

But humans and animals, having lived out their time in vigor and strength, grew old and weak, wasting away and fading. So the gods established another home beneath the earth for the dead, right at the very bottom, much deeper still than where the Black Elves dwell: they called it the Realm of the Dead, the Land of Mist. There is eternal darkness there; there the streams of the underworld roar with icy waters; there the dark caves teem with snakes, and giant dragons rattle through the chasms with their scaly bodies. Therefore, every true man, Erik, must ensure that he does not have to go there after his death, but that the gods will one day take him in among themselves.

Now all beings and all worlds and realms had been created: the realm of the giants, the realm of the dwarves, the realm of the elves and the albs, the spirit realms, the underworld, and the realm of mankind, Midgard.

And there grew the greatest of wonders from the depths of the earth: the tree of all trees, the World Ash Yggdrasil. It stretched its trunk up to the stars, its crown rustled high up in the heavens, and it spread its branches over all beings:

> An ash tree rises from the earth's depths
> high into the sky:
> Its intertwining branches spread protectively Over
> the living universe.

White torrents of sky surge and drench the leaves of the World-Ash above; high in the treetops, above the bright clouds, sits an eagle, gazing up into the sun and shrieking its song toward the stars. But down below in the darkness beneath the earth, where all life comes to an end, there Nidhögg, the dragon, the Greedy Tooth, gnaws at the roots of the ash tree, filled with furious envy."

“Does he want to destroy the World Tree, Uncle?”

“Indeed he does, Erik. Full of hatred, he peers up from beneath the ground toward the light, where high in the treetop the sun-eagle sings, and his growl rolls grimly up from the darkness into the air. Between dragon and eagle, it glides up and down the trunk like a flickering wisp of storm and hisses: a squirrel, fiery red, carrying Nidhögg's threats from the depths to the heights. But the sunbird laughs with a bright clamour from the blue, and in vain does Nidhögg gnaw, so that it constantly creaks and cracks in the roots. Evergreen grows the trunk, spreading its branches ever more powerfully and widely. For a clear pond glistens, shaded by dense foliage, at the foot of the ash tree: on the shore of the pond sit the three giant sisters, the Norns, their heads veiled in gray, spinning the fabric of the world's destiny. Urd is the eldest, who spins the thread of the past; Vrdandi is the second, who weaves what is set; Skuld is the youngest, who creates what will one day be. The daughters of fate spin in silence: they guard the world tree so that it may thrive despite Nidhogg's furious gnawing, and they water its roots with water from the sacred pond.

Holy, Erik, is the place at the foot of the ash tree. Here everything comes together that reigns high in the heavens and that dwells in the darkness beneath the earth: here the gods ride to hold their day of judgment over all that breathes. They ride down from the heavens on a bridge that stretches in a wide arc down to the earth. No human foot can tread upon it, for they have forged its planks from sparkling fire: it glows brightly through the air in many colors. But only when the sun shines into the dark clouds can humans see it:

> A bridge arches its shimmering span From the abode of
> the gods to the earth:
> It arches far across the dark mass,
> woven from sparkling colors." L*

“Oh, I’ve seen those too! When Father was about to set out on a military campaign in the summer, a storm broke out
— and when it had cleared, and he rode away from the farm, there it shone above him in the clouds!"

“That was the bridge. ‘Move,’ say the gods to it, ‘tremble’; for it glows and quivers in the air.

But at the bridgehead up there in the clouds, the gate of heaven sparkles. When the guardian of the Aesir blows his horn, it opens, and the radiance from the blessed lands shines into the heavens. Sometimes we are granted a glimpse of it from afar: there, white, sunlit hills gleam against the azure sky, and golden gables glow."

“Do all the gods dwell together in one place there?”

“No, Erik, there are many dwellings in Asgard, and each one built his own according to his own desire.”

“And which god has the most beautiful one?”

“Odin has the most magnificent residence. Beneath the far-reaching branches of the ash tree, where the dark clouds billow thickest through the foliage, there he built his house upon a hill. From afar, anyone approaching can recognize the warrior god’s home. Bronze shields cover the hall like shingles; spear shafts cross over the gable with gleaming metal tips. From the mist-clouds on the roof, a bright sound echoes: there grazes Heidrun, the heavenly goat, with golden horns; with her long neck she plucks the leaves from the branches of the world tree, and from her udders flows a never-ending stream of delicious, shimmering mead for Odin’s retinue; but above the arch of the front door, a wolf, artfully carved, opens its jaws as if it were alive. Above the wolf, an eagle spreads its wings and peers out at the guest with its head stretched forward. Armed, Odin steps out of the door when strife arises among men in the world—for that is his greatest delight, to lead the races of men into battle: the bravest and the mightiest shall be lord upon the earth, so he wills it! In a golden helmet, in gleaming armor, Gungnir, the resounding spear in his right hand, he sets out on his

from the hall, and his mighty gray beard blows in the wind. Behind him streams from the hall the host of shield-maidens: these are his messengers and helpers in battle, the Valkyries. Their long, fair hair flutters beneath their helmets:

> The beauties shake their shields, eager for battle; the maidens swing their swords with a shout of joy.

A loud neigh rings out: Odin's gray steed Sleipnir, the Glider, scrapes his hooves and shakes his shimmering mane. The god leaps onto Sleipnir's back and storms through the clouds. Odin's stallion has eight feet, and they are scarcely long enough for him, so he must run. Battle cries echo around the god: on their winged steeds the shield-maidens fly with him.

Odin halts on Sleipnir above the armies: they clash below, the princes at the very front and behind them shield to shield, the mass of warriors spreading ever wider like a wedge of fierce boars. Odin hurls Gungnir, the spear, over the armies, so that it whistles and clangs through the air. Battle fury rises in the hearts of the men, and they rush against one another.

Then the shield-maidens glide down from the clouds. The heroes who fall in battle, they lift from the blood-soaked ground before them onto the saddles of their steeds and gallop with them through the air to Odinsheim. There the dead awaken to new life."

"And what do they do then, Uncle?"

"They fight, Erik, all over again!"

"But who do they fight up there in Asgard?"

"They fight among themselves, always one against the other. Wigrid is the name of a vast plain before the gates of Asgard. There, day after day, the hosts of Odin's heroes, the Einherjar, clash against one another. And you can imagine, Erik, that mighty blows are struck there, where only the finest warriors do battle. There are terrible wounds there; many a one falls down in

blood. But when the sun goes down, the heroes are all alive again, whole and strong as before. Joking, they ride home together, those who just moments ago fought fiercely, and enter Odin's hall.

They call it Valhalla, the hall of the fallen heroes. Inside, the walls gleam with the shine of weapons all around, and on the high seat sits the heroes' greatest delight: Odin. His eye sparkles like the sun, his long gray beard falls deep down onto his chest, and on his right arm glitters the ruler's ring, the world-ring Draupnir, the Tearer, made of pure gold. At the god's feet lie two mighty wolves, their bristly hairs on their backs standing on end: the greedy Geri and Frcki, the Wild One. Perched on the back of the high seat, two ravens sit at Odin's head, their plumage black as night, their eyes flashing: Hugin flies as swiftly as a man's thought, Munin peers keenly into the hidden as memory does into the depths of the past. Every morning they fly out, every evening they return and whisper in their master's ear what they have overheard and seen outside. Thus Odin knows all that happens in the world.

From his high seat, he welcomes the heroes. Joyfully they sit down in the god's hall: they have grown weary of battle, hungry and thirsty. Then the shield-maidens come, dressed in bright robes, without breastplates or helmets, and greet the warriors with laughing eyes—those they have carried up from the battlefield on their steeds. They pour foaming beer and cool mead into their mugs and horns and serve them as much of the delicious meat as they desire. For in Valhalla's kitchen the cook stands ever before the crackling fire, and sweat runs down his soot-stained face as he must tend it: He boils Valhalla's black boar, and it never diminishes: no matter how much the cook serves of it, by morning it is whole and whole again. There the heroes feast and drink, chatting and joking with the shield-maidens, until their eyes all close in sleep.

But Odin does not eat the meat nor drink the beer, as the song says:

> Geri and Freki, the greedy wolves, eat
> from the hand of the army's father—
> Walvater himself, the weapon-loving one.
> He lives on wine alone.

But only those who prove themselves in battle and do not spare their lives may go to Odin's realm. Whoever dies a coward in bed on a bed of straw must journey to the underworld... Hakon, the Thunder Bear, our forefather Erik, had grown old: he could no longer wield his weapons in battle. So he had a pyre built from his dragon ship, which he climbed while wearing his helmet: the wood blazed up, and the ship drifted out to sea. Hakon, the Thunder Bear, however, sat in the flames and sang of his glory and the gods—then he drew his sword and struck himself with the death wound. Thus he died a heroic death instead of a miserable one... And this is my hope, Erik: that when I one day journey to Valhalla, Hakon, the ancestor, will meet me at the gate and lead me himself to Odin's high seat."

The chieftain fell silent and gazed into the flames.

His wife on the other side of the fire placed the colorful cloth she had been embroidering in her lap. She brushed the braid of hair from her forehead and sighed:

"Odin is grim. Often the god is unjust. He grants defeat and victory on a whim, not according to merit. King Harald's men won at Bocksfjord—my ancestor fell before them."

Hakon looked up.

"Those are a woman's thoughts," he said, "I do not reproach you for them, Gudrun: that is how you are made. But we men believe: no less than victory and survival is the honor of being allowed to go to Odin in battle. For the god does not gather the heroes in his hall for mere amusement, nor do they train in combat against

Wigrid, the field of battle. The god needs them for the final battle one day against the monsters and giants!"

"Is Odin afraid of the giants, Uncle?"

"No, Erik. Odin is not afraid. But Odin is not merely the god of warriors and princes. Odin is All-Father: he cares for the world he has built. It is no small matter that he sends Hugin and Munin, the ravens, into the heavens to scout. Hmir, the primeval giant, fell, but Hmir's lineage is still mighty. In the gentle sea, in the roaring winds, in the devouring flames, in the depths of the earth—everywhere the monsters and fiends lurk, waiting to destroy the Aesir's power and their world; for they hate what stands firm and is straight as the timbers that support the house and roof. And there are many people, and there will be ever more, who are no better than monsters and fiends.

There Odin wanders as a traveler, to see that all is well and to find out what is needed. He pulls his storm-hat, dark as a storm cloud, low over his face so that no one may recognize him, and wraps himself in a cloak of blue frieze. Far and wide does Odin wander: paths that no one dares to tread but him. He sat as a stranger among the darkest giants. He descended into the depths of the underworld and roused Wala, the seeress, from the dead, that she might impart her wisdom to him.

Of course, the men in England and Germany no longer share our faith. That Odin, whom they call Wodan, is the Lord of Heaven—that does not occur to them. Valhalla, they argue, lies down below the earth, where the dead dwell, and Wodan is the lord of the ghosts. When the storm giants howl and tear the clouds to shreds, they believe Wodan is roaring through the skies at the head of the army of the dead. And they are afraid. But most of all during the Yule nights of winter—at that time they now celebrate the birth of their new god, the Prince of Peace from the South. Then they shut the windows and hatches in the house, so that Wodan cannot enter with the army of the dead

and snatch their souls away in the storm. Thus, Odin is a terror to them.

But we believe and hold fast to the belief, Erik, that Odin is the Lord of Heaven: the father of us all, the creator of the world. And the mother of us all is Odin's companion—his wife!"

"Her name is Frigg, isn't it, Ohm? Father has told me about her too!"

"Frigg is Odin's wife, the mother of the gods, the first of the Aesir: like the woman of the house, she rules over the whole world, and the keys to heaven jingle at her belt. She is tall of stature, with smooth, yellow hair and a serious, stern face, and nothing is hidden from her eyes, as is said of a good housewife: she must have her eyes everywhere. Frija was her name among the Germanic men when they still held to our faith. That means: the beloved wife, the mother, the protector and the sustainer.

"That was the first thing Odin did after he had established Valhalla: he built Frigg's home in Asgard."

"Does Frigg not dwell with him in Valhalla?"

"She is often in Valhalla. But she also has her own seat in Fensalir, her forest home, for the heavenly queen's retinue is large and she has much to attend to. The place is cool with shade and rich in water: from all the forest meadows, springs and streams murmur and rush into Frigg's hall. There she sits in the evening by the fire in the circle of her maidens and ponders whether all is going as it should in the world. Her helpers, however, go from time to time into the hall to ask what Frigg commands of them. They are also Asinn, Erik, for though they willingly serve Frigg, they do not therefore belong to the servants.

Gefjun, the silent one with brown, wavy hair, stands at Frigg's right hand by her seat. Her steel-blue eyes look proud and stern. Our maidens call out to her. She is unmarried and avoids the company of men: she wishes to serve only Frigg, her mistress, and knows of no one else. That is why

Frigg trusts her, and there is little that Gefjun does not know if Frigg knows it.

Fulla, the cheerful one, with a golden ribbon in her curls and round, gleaming arms, guards Frigg's chambers and chests.

Gna, the towering messenger, is rarely at home: most of the time she races through the air on her steed, to proclaim Frigg's commands to the farthest reaches of the world. Once, a man stood on the seashore and looked up at the sky.

"What is rustling there, what is running there, what is racing through the air?" he cried. Then a voice echoed down from on high:

> "I rustle, I run, I race through the air
> From Hufschnell, the wild one, the cloud stallion, The
> messenger of the gods, Gna!"

Hlin, with her light braids, the bright-eyed Asm, is also often on the move. Frigg sends her out to protect people from danger: one sleeps safely from dark powers, from elves and trolls, in the chamber where Hlin keeps watch.

Losn, the gentle one, slender, with supple limbs and a friendly face, is the intercessor for humans before Frigg. Where suffering groans, where misfortune cries out for help, there Losn listens, and thus she knows how to choose her words so that Frigg is pleased to hear her.

Snotra, the Wise, ensures that people uphold the customs and traditions of their forefathers, and do not live in wild abandon like the Bich.

War, the Stern One, clad in helmet and chain mail, spear in hand, watches over that everyone holds sacred what they swear, and she punishes harshly those who break their oaths.

But Saga, the wise, the eloquent Asm, has her own dwelling near Frigg's Waldheim, and there, too, clear waters rush down from the hills through rustling forests. In a blue robe embroidered with silver stars, her shimmering hair flowing freely down to her hips, she sits in the hall with her golden harp and gently plucks the strings, so that the

sound of the harp blends with the murmur of the waters. Often Odin visits her to listen to her song, for she knows much to tell of the most ancient times.

> The proud hall is called the Torrent, Surrounded
> by the roar of the waterfall:
> There Saga drinks mead blissfully with Odin
> from a shimmering bowl.

Thus Odin and Frigg ensure that the world flourishes, and their helpers with them.

But when in the Thursen Mountains, on the shores of the World Sea, a wild roar rises and the Thursen seek to break out of their domains into Midgard, then Odin looks to Thor, his son, whom the men in Saxony call Donar, the Thunderer!"

“Thor—is that the one, Grandfather, who throws the hammer so that lightning flashes and thunder roars from the clouds?”

“That is Thor, the strongest among the Aesir.”

“Is Thor even stronger than Odin?”

“Thor is even stronger. But Thor is not as wise as Odin, so Thor must follow him as the warrior follows the prince. Thor is a son of Odin, but Frigg is not his mother. In ancient times, Odin once wandered through the Thursen Mountains. There, in a lonely cave, he met a woman: mighty of limb, she sat in the depths; her gentle eyes gazed from her shadowed face, blue as mountain lakes from dark rock. That was Jörd, the Earth Mother, from whom Odin won Thor as his son."

“What is that: the Earth Mother, Grandfather?”

“The Earth Mother, Erik, is the mistress of all the forces that spring from the earth’s depths. These are mighty forces, for everything that breathes lives by them. No one knows for certain from which lineage Jörd came, just as no one can look down into the dark depths of the earth. Some say she was of the race of giants; others, that she was an Asa. I think she must have been a giantess, but then the gods likely spared her

the Aesir because of her magnificent son by Odin, Thor.

Thor is tall of stature, with a mighty frame.

His hair is fiery red, his beard is fiery red, and his eyes, too, blaze like fire. Thor is quick to anger. Then sparks fly from his eyes, and his hair and beard crackle as if they were about to burst into flames.

Thor, the slayer of the Thurses, is Odin's best helper against monsters and fiends: he ventures out into the wastelands of the icy sea to slay them—to the ends of the world and beyond, where the Jötnar, the devourers, dwell beyond the world. Thor wields neither sword nor spear, but only the thunder hammer: that is why he is also called Schwingethor, Wingthor. But the hammer is called Mjölnir, the Crusher, because it crushes everything it strikes. And time and again it returns of its own accord to its master's hand.

Thick clouds roll before Thor as he marches to battle—

He rides across the sky in his chariot: two steeds carry him along in wild leaps—but they are not horses, rather two mighty goats, black and shaggy, with curved horns, their long beards sweeping darkly through the air. Thor's battle cry booms far and wide from the clouds, the wheels roll and crash, the thunderhammer whirs and strikes. Then all the mountains tremble far and wide. "Hlorridi is coming!" scream their wives, "the terrible roarer!" and flee with their children into the caves. And the people, too, look anxiously to the sky when Thor appears in the storm clouds, fearing that his hammer might strike and set fire to a house or barn. But once he has graciously rolled past, the rain pours down upon the fields and meadows, the ice giants have fled from the pastures and alpine meadows up to the barren glaciers, and the farmer goes out with his plow to the field. That is why we call Thor, as fierce as he is, the protector of mankind, the mighty friend of the human race, and the farmers are especially grateful to him.

But Thor's hammer, the terror of the Thurses, which keeps the fiends in check, is held so sacred by gods and men alike that no contract is valid, no oath, no marriage, and no law—nothing is valid before the heavenly ones—unless Thor has swung his hammer in blessing over it.

Among the Saxons, Thor, their Donar, was associated with the mightiest and strongest tree in the land: the oak. When the men came from the south to proclaim their new god, their priests first felled the oaks in the sacred groves of Donar. "Your god is worthless!" they mocked. "There you see! Why doesn't he hurl his hammer at us?"

"And why didn't Thor strike them dead like the monsters and giants?"

"Before the lightning leaps from the cloud, the storm cloud contracts. But the weather that slowly rumbles up in the sky strikes with the greatest fury. They had better watch out!

Yet as fierce as Thor is in battle, he is just as good a family man at home. He dwells in Thrudwang, the realm of strength. Light mists rise there from the fertile fields, as after a spring storm. The sun glimmers through the hillsides. There the goats with tall antlers graze and chew the juicy grass with a crackling sound—Tanngrisnir, the Cruncher, Tannggniost, the Crackler—and sparks fly from their blackish fur when they shake themselves. But from his house it sometimes rolls out, muffled like a thunderstorm that is fading into the distance. There Thor murmurs in the high seat with his kin. Gently and kindly, Sif, the clan-ruthless one, his wife, listens to the god's speech. Bright and slender as a birch sapling, his favorite, Thrud, the daughter, stands by her father and shakes her shining curls. Thjalsi, the lanky servant, waits by the door, ready to spring at his master's call, and Röskwa, the bustling maid, brings him food and drink. A mighty bowl of porridge and herring stands before the god, hearty peasant fare that Thor prefers above all else, and frothy beer

from his enormous mug in thirsty gulps. For just as mightily as Thor fights, so mightily does he feast and drink.

Thor also has two sons, both still boys, who were born to a lover of Thor's among the giants. From their father's divine power and their mother's giant strength came Magni the Mighty and the wrathful Modi. At three days old, they were already nearly as mighty as their father. When Magni and Modi shake their red hair in fury, it flashes like lightning across the world.

Thor has many friends among the Aesir; for he loves good company over a fine drink. One is Tyr, the god of the sword, whom he likes to see across from him in his hall from his high seat. For Tyr is as brave as Thor, though not quite as strong.

His mother is called All-Golden: her hair shines like the sun sparkling over the snowfields from the mists of the icy sea. Hymir, the giant, once stole her from Asgard and still holds her captive on his island high up in the north. Tyr's father is Hymir. But Tyr ascended from Thursenheim to join the Aesir, and he has little love for the giants.

Like Odin, Tyr delights in battle. Like Odin, he stirs the souls of men to strife. Battle, he believes, is the noble Bertis's: the servant pays for his life with his sweat, the free man with his blood. "As bold as Tyr"—that is the highest praise for a warrior. And it is no easier to look into Tyr's sparkling eye than into the lightning that tears through the clouds.

Yes, before the Germanic men had abandoned their old faith, they believed that Tyr was the lord of the heavens.

So the ancestor told it.

In Saxony, when he was there for the last time, he met envoys from the south at the chieftain's, with whom he had concluded a truce. The men were called Swabians: the "Schlasmützen." But why they were called that, the ancestor did not know, for they seemed very alert to him. They quarreled valiantly over

beer with the Saxons and shouted that the Lord of Heaven, Ziu—as they called Tyr—was the highest: greater and stronger than Donar and Wodan and all the others. And soon there would have been bloodshed.

What is certain, however, is that Tyr is a great god, and once, all by himself, he saved the Aesir and the universe from destruction.

Tyr has only one hand, his left, with which he wields his sword; his right hand, he lost back then.

A wolf came into the world: Fenrir, the terrible devourer. He fed on the corpses of fallen men, and grew so huge from it that he soon became the strongest of all who live. So the gods decided to bind Fenrir, lest he destroy the world. But this had to be done with cunning. The gods fashioned a sturdy rope and tested it: Thor pulled on one end, Tyr on the other. But the rope remained whole. Then the Aesir boasted that they had created a rope that no one could break. The wolf heard this, and it angered him so much that he could no longer bear to stay at home: for he believed that nothing could withstand his strength. He came to the gates of Asenheim and let himself be bound. He strained his limbs—and the rope creaked and snapped.

So the gods consulted one another and fashioned a new one, which was even stronger. But the wolf, too, had grown in strength in the meantime, and he tore it apart.

Now the Aesir saw that this would not work, and sent a messenger to Dwarfheim. For the little dwarves in the mountains and beneath the earth are the wisest craftsmen in the world. When the messenger told them in their dark cave hall how the Aesir had fared with Fenrir, they laughed and shook their beards.

“Silence overcomes the storm,” they said; “the strongest falls before the weakest!”

And they fashioned a chain from the lightest things in the world: from the breath of a fish, from the saliva of a bird, from the stealthy step of a cat. They called it Gleipnir. Thin

and delicate, the band shone like a spider's web in the sun. But when the wolf saw it, he shuddered back, snorted through his nostrils, and bristled: the thing seemed as eerie to him as a ghost.

Then the gods mocked him for fearing such a spider's web.

Fenrir grew angry and bared his grim teeth. "Let one of you place his hand in my throat as a pledge that there is no deceit here, and I will allow myself to be bound!" Then the gods looked at one another and fell silent. But Tyr stepped forward and boldly placed his right hand in the jaws full of teeth. Fenrir was bound with Gleipnir's glittering strands. He strained his limbs, he arched his back mightily. Gleipnir gave way—but did not tear: Fenrir was captured!

Then he clenched his teeth in fury, and Tyr's right hand remained in the wolf's jaws.

Behind Asgard's gates, Fenrir now lies bound at the courtyard gate and howls. But Heimdall sits before him, spear in hand, watching over him so that he does not break free."

"Who is Heimdall, Uncle?"

"Have you not yet heard of Heimdall, Erik, the far-famed, the guardian of the gods, who protects heaven and earth? The lofty guardian of the heavens was born from the sea. In the sea, nine wave maidens, the daughters of Ægir, rocked him in their laps until he grew up. Then he rode forth from the roaring flood like the bright day from the darkness, on a horse with a golden mane, whose forelocks and mane shone a bright yellow.

The bright one is called Heimdall. He is awake at the crack of dawn. Before the sun rises, his face peeks out from the sky: a bright glow spreads across the lands. Heimdall has sharp eyes: he gazes all around to the ends of the world and even further. And he hears everything that moves: he hears the grass sprouting from the ground, and how the wool gently grows on the soft backs of the sheep.

He dwells in Himinbjörg, the fortress on the edge of the Heavenly Mountains, where Bifröst, the bridge of the gods, begins.

> In Himinbjörg, Heimdall, the guardian, watches
> over the heavenly sanctuary:
> Cheerfully he sips mead from a
> mighty mug in the high hall.

But Heimdall is rarely granted rest. He usually sits outside the Heavenly Gate at the bridgehead. There the branches of the World Tree rustle above him, and from the dense foliage his guardian horn of pure silver glimmers on its chain, as if the moon were shining through loose clouds. It is called Gjal-larhorn, the Ringing Horn. It is mightily coiled, and when Heimdall sets it to his lips and blows into it, its sound echoes throughout all worlds. Ever-watchful, he scans the world, but especially toward Thursenheim, to ensure that the monsters and giants do no harm to the gods, and that no one sneaks across the bridge secretly to Asenhcim.

It would be a disaster for the world if Heimdall were ever to forget his duty as guardian. But those who rely on Heimdall are not disappointed. Heimdall is faithful, helpful, and kind to both gods and mortals. And he is wise, ever watching over the world.

"Heimdall's children" is what humans are called. Though he did not create them, he has established discipline and order among them like a father; we owe it to him that we live, each in his own station. For in the beginning there were neither farmers nor servants, nor warriors nor princes. Then Heimdall descended to Earth. He strode along green paths in the sunshine, vigorous and joyful, until he came upon a fence by the way: the gate hung crookedly in the gatehouse, behind which stood a low hut covered with straw. Heimdall stepped inside. A small fire glowed on the hearth, by which Ai and Edda, the forefather and foremother, warmed themselves, dressed in wonderfully ancient, lost attire.

Heimdall sat down with them. The ancient ancestor brought a loaf of bread

for the guest—oat bread, coarse and ground, with bran and husks in it. They set meat broth before him in an earthen bowl. And Heimdall stayed with them through the night. He lay on the bed of straw between Ai and Edda. They lamented to him that they had no children to care for them in their old age. So he spoke with them at length and gave them advice. And when some time had passed, Edda bore a child, a boy, whom they named Thräl, which means “servant.” Thräl was certainly not a handsome sight: he stood there with a hunched back and a blocky head, black-haired, yellow-faced, with clumsy fists and clumsy feet. But the boy thrived and quickly grew strong: he learned to tie bast, he hauled loads, and he gathered fallen timber in the forest.

Then a maid waddled onto the farmyard on crooked legs, her face and arms sunburned, her nose flat. Thräl took quite a liking to her. They became husband and wife and loved one another. They had many sons: Potbelly and Clubfoot, Dungbird, Goofball, and Slacker. And the girls didn’t have any prettier names either: Thick Calf, Rags-to-Riches, and “Look in the Pot!”

The farmhands burst out laughing, the maids giggled in the back of the hall. But Swart, the old overseer, said:

“Is this to be the lineage of the servants, my lord? Then, I think, the singers have lied: we do not call our boys and girls by such names. Nor would I know why!”

Hakon smiled.

“Of course, the singers do not always speak the truth, and here one has likely been malicious toward you servants. It has also been a long time since Heimdall visited our forefathers and foremothers. I have seen no club-footed ones among you, and I would not call any of you fools except Heimar, the clumsy one, and the gods gave him that as a gift at birth, so we must just leave him be."

Heimar, the fool, grinned from the hearth beneath his low brow.

“And what did Heimdall do then, Uncle?” asked Erik.

“Once again, Heimdall strode along green paths in the sunshine, brisk and cheerful. There he came upon a farmstead: the house with its gable towered stately over the fence. Heimdall stepped through the door: there the fire blazed mightily from the hearth, and on the bench against the long wall sat Afi and Amma, Ahn and Ahne, working. The man was carving at the loom: his beard was carefully combed, his blond curls fell across his forehead, and his clean, wrinkle-free shirt fit him well and snugly. Wearing a headdress with ribbons, a colorful cloth across her chest, Amma sat beside him, winding the spinning thread from the distaff. And beneath the bench stood the stately chest, well-filled with cloths of linen and fine wool. Amma served the guest the best they had: bowls full of porridge and boiled veal, delicious morsels. And that night, Heimdall lay in the wide bed between the master of the house and his wife: there he announced that they would soon have a son.

Not long after, Amma gave birth to a little boy. The father lifted him from the floor to his chest as a sign that he accepted the child and intended to raise him. They sprinkled water on his head and named him Karl, the sturdy lad. The mother swaddled him in clean linen swaddling clothes. The boy was strong and healthy, with blood-red cheeks and fiery red hair: he rolled his eyes merrily and laughed. He thrived magnificently. He learned many things: to forge plows, to till the fields, to build stables, and to construct houses.

Then the clans brought his bride to him in a wagon to his , her head modestly veiled. She sat stately and tall in the wagon with simple hair and bright eyes: keys jingled at her belt above the warm goatskin skirt. “Schnur” was her name, the daughter from out of town. Karl took her as his wife. “Early Riser” and “Brave,” “Broad-chested” and “Longbeard” were the names of the sons— “Hearth-Happy,” “Chest-Rich,” “Possession-Proud” were her daughters.

Thus Heimdall had also founded the lineage of the farmers.” 3»

“Doesn’t Skeggi, the Broadbeard, who fetched the sleigh yesterday, our neighbor, belong to that lineage, Uncle?”

“Skeggi is of the peasant lineage... And once again Heimdall wandered along green paths in the sunshine, brisk and cheerful. There he came upon a tall building, enclosed by a delicately carved fence: to the south, the gate towered with a bronze ring on the iron bolt. Heimdall stepped into the hall, where the floor was covered with crackling straw, colorful tapestries hung, and weapons gleamed down from the walls. In the high seat before the long fire in the hall sat “Father” in a linen robe trimmed with purple, a belt around his hips studded with silver, a silk band across his forehead: beneath it, his thick yellow hair flowed down onto his shoulders. He bent the bow, he twisted the string, he sharpened the arrows.

At his side sat “Mother” in a tall headdress, in a long blue silk gown: she smoothed out the folds of the magnificent dress and tugged the sleeves straight. Her brows shimmered, her neck glowed, her breast gleamed whiter than snow. She looked kindly at Father with blue eyes, took his hand, and played with his fingers. They greeted the guest, and Mother rose to prepare the meal. She set the tables with gleaming linen, a separate one for each. She brought out thin loaves of white wheat bread, roasted bacon, and fried birds in silver bowls, and the delicious wine in a gleaming jug. So they sat, feasting and drinking and telling stories to one another until night fell. Then Heimdall lay down on a soft pillow beneath a soft linen cloth between the two of them and promised them an heir in gratitude for their hospitality.

His mother bore a son with fair hair and glowing cheeks, his eyes sharp as a serpent’s gaze. They anointed his head, wrapped him in silk swaddling clothes, and named him
“Iarl,” which means prince.

Iarl grew up in the courtyard and hall. He learned to wield shield and sword, to hurl spears, to draw the bow, to carve and shoot arrows, to hunt with dogs, to ride stallions, and to swim.

Jarl went forth into battle, fought wars, and won booty and land. He generously shared with his men what he had won: weapons and steeds, golden arm rings, jewelry, and ornaments. As a prince ought to do, Erik, with good companions. Then he sent a messenger out to Hersen, the district prince, his neighbor. There, seated on the bench, was his daughter Erna, the Wise, with slender white fingers, sitting quietly among the women. The messengers courted her on her father's behalf and brought the fair maiden, veiled, to the jarl as his wife. There they lived together in harmony and joy. "Noble Sprout," "Young Lord," "Ring-Giver" they called the sons; "Noble Maiden," "Joyful Adornment," "Realm-Bringer" their daughters.

Thus were all the estates created, the clans of servants, peasants, and princes, and Heimdall returned to Asenheim in the heavens. For he could not stay away long. Who else would perform his duty as guardian? It requires great wisdom and a strong will: it is truly hard enough: winter and summer, in wind and weather, he must sit outside at the foot of the bridge and keep watch constantly. That is why some mock him, saying he does it for the Aesir—but those, I think, are the ones who do not like that he watches so keenly to ward off all mischief:

> "Wretched, I call him above all others,
> Heimdall, the guardian of the heavens:
> He keeps watch before the gates of Asgard
> With a hunched back, his head bowed."

Then it is the wise watchman's greatest comfort when Bragi sings inside the hall of the gods' glory, so that it resounds all the way to the gate."

"Bragi, Uncle?"

"Bragi, the Bearded One, is Odin's son, the singer of the Aesir. His eyes lie deep beneath his brow. He likes to be alone: then he ponders how the world was created and what

will become of it. He knows all that ever happened in ancient times, all the deeds of the gods and heroes; for no one holds what he has heard as firmly in his mind as Bragi. When he raises his voice, it grows quiet in the hall, and Bragi's song and speech stir the hearts more powerfully than mead. We call our poets "Bragi's men."

His wife is Jdun, the eternally young, like the evergreen that never withers. She sits quietly in Bragi's home, and most of all she loves to listen to her husband's song. Jdun is a diligent housewife. Little is said of her in Asgard, but the gods have entrusted much to her. There is a tree in the heavenly realm that bears apples that gleam like gold from its foliage. Whoever eats of these apples remains as fresh and strong as ever. That is why the gods, ever since they have had the tree, live without growing old.

Jdun guards this tree so that no one may steal from it in secret: she prunes its foliage, she tends its roots, she picks the apples from its branches. She keeps them in her chest, and every morning she distributes them among the Aesir.

But no one listens to Bragi's songs as eagerly as his brother Widar. Among the Aesir, he is called the Silent One: he knows that Fate has entrusted him with a grave and sacred task at the end of days, and that is why his lips remain sealed. A giantess gave birth to Widar, the Silent One, Grid, the Faithful: she had once, in primeval times, sheltered Odin, the Wanderer, from the giants when he roamed unarmed through Thursenheim. Widar's land, Midi, lies far out on the borders of Asenheim. No field of grain glistens, no fruit ripens there: like a green sea, grass and brush sway far and wide across the pastures of Midi. Widar roams alone through the rustling wilderness and thinks of the future. Only rarely does he come to his father's hall to drink with the gods. But when he steps through the door, Odin himself rises from his seat and goes to meet him. He seats his son at his side and speaks secret words to him in private. For Odin places all his trust in Widar. Odin learned this from the Norns

under the ash tree: he too, the father of the gods, will one day fall in the final battle, when the universe and the rulers of the heavens perish. When Fenrir, the giant wolf, opens his jaws to devour the world! But he will not fall without vengeance! Then he looks with kind eyes upon his son Widar, who is the strongest among the Aesir after Thor."

"Will Widar avenge his father against the wolf?"

"He will... And yet there is one among the Aesir whom Odin loves even more than his avenger, and Widar loves him no less than his father!

That is Balder, Odin and Frigg's youngest son, the favorite of all gods and men. Even the dark faces of the Thursi brighten when they see Balder walking in splendor above them, and the monsters and dragons, weary of hatred, close their eyes. None among the gods has a face so radiant, not even Heimdall. We call a flower with a golden center surrounded by white ray-like petals "Balder's eyelash." As white as the ray-like petals, Balder's eyelashes glisten; as golden as the flower's center, his eyes shine. He looks openly into the face of everyone, fearless of heart, a stranger to wickedness! And right into the innermost depths, they say, he gazes upon people:

> His gaze pierces through thickets and darkness,
> Where guilt and shame hide timidly, Where deep in
> misery misfortune mourns,
> Where suffering yearns anxiously for the light.

That is why the gods appointed him guardian of justice over the world.

He dwells in Breidablick, called "Distant Glow." For even from afar one sees the high hall up there in the clouds glistening and shining. There he holds court. No villain and no fiend dares to approach Distant Glow:

> The wicked fled the place of peace; no evil
> dwelt in Balder's home:

Whoever gazed upon the shimmering meadows with their
eyes, Hatred and envy faded from their hearts.

All the gods ensure that no harm befalls Balder, and all good people place their hope in him.

Nanna, the daughter of Nep, grew up in Asenheim. From a young age, she followed Balder wherever he went: on Fernenglanz she sat by his side, and when he spoke justice, she looked into his shining eyes:

Light like the cloud in the spring breeze,
That drifts upward from the sea toward the sun.

Balder took her as his wife.

Just as Nanna follows your Balder everywhere, so does Hermod, the messenger of the gods, his brother. But in battle and with weapons, he follows him to watch over Balder. As young as he is, so brave is Hermod. “Faithful unto death,” they say of him, and he will prove it in due time. And yet, I fear, all concern for Balder will be of no avail when his hour comes: Balder has another brother, Höd, strong but blind from birth, who is as different from him as night is from day.

As bright as Balder’s face is, so pale is Höd’s. As freely as Balder speaks and judges in council, so reserved and taciturn is Höd. He is called the Unfortunate among the Aesir. For all know it, and Höd himself: from him will one day come the greatest calamity upon the gods, even if he himself does not will it. That is why all the heavenly ones shun him: he leans alone in the corners of the hall of the gods and broods over his dark fate.

Frigg, his mother, takes little joy in this son of hers. Often, when she sits by the fire in Fensalir in the evening, and the forest streams murmur and rush into the hall, she rests her forehead in her hand and worries about what will become of Höd."

“Are those all the gods now, Grandpa? Or do you know of another?”

“There are many gods still. And I haven’t told you about one of the mightiest yet: that is Freyer. But Freyer is not an Aesir, but a Vanir.”

I haven't told you about yet: that is Freyer. But Freyer is not an Aesir, but a Vanir."

"What is that: a Wane, Grandpa?"

"The Manes, the High-Shining Ones, are also gods, but they are younger and of a different lineage than the Aesir.

When the Aesir had founded the world and built their homes, they rested. And they could well do so; for there were still only a few giants and monsters, after almost all of them had drowned in Amir's sea of blood. Peace reigned in the world. Over a merry drink, the Aesir sat and played the board game with their golden dice for amusement.

Then, on the shore of the sea below, a new race of gods arose: the Manes. The Aesir were fierce warriors. Bur, their ancestor, had sprung from the rock; they had had to fight the giants through night and ice until they subdued them, and it was no easy task to create the world from Dmir's lumpy body.

The Manes had it better. The world was already formed, and they had time to attend to other matters. They were wise and inventive. They maintained a friendship with the dwarves in the cleft, where they learned magic and gained treasures and gold. With the water spirits, when the mists rose from the shore, they held secret conversations, and much wisdom was entrusted to them by Ägir, the old giant at the bottom of the sea. It was they who taught humans to build ships and sail across the waves in them, and to conduct trade to their advantage. The Manes grew powerful, all crafts flourished, and trade and wealth spread across the earth. One of them was named Gullweig, Goldflint, for her brows and hair shimmered golden, so that one might think she were made entirely of gold when she walked in the distance in the sunshine. She traveled far and wide through all the lands, seeking to win the hearts of men. And as the saying goes, "a man's heart is attached to gold," so she succeeded most of the time. Once, however, she crept into Asenheim, where the Aesir seized her and decided to burn her for

her magical arts. Three times they cast her into the flames, but each time she emerged shining ever more brightly, like gold that has passed through fire and shines ever more brightly.

The Vanir heard this. So they marched to Asenheim across Bifröst, their weapons clanging. Heimdall saw their army rolling toward him, seemingly endless across the bridge. He blew his horn shrill. The Aesir grabbed their weapons and ran to the battlefield. On Wigrid, the battlefield, the hosts of gods stood facing each other. From the ranks of the Manes, Njörd, their leader, stepped forward and cried out in a loud voice that the Aesir should release Gull-weig and pay penance for their mistreatment, or else there would be battle!

Then Odin hurled his spear over the army, so that it whistled, and the first war in the universe thundered.

Fearfully, the people below gathered together. The end of the world, they thought, had come: so clanged and crashed the battle above them. And suddenly there was a mighty blaze in the clouds: the flames blazed across the entire sky. The Vanir had hurled fires toward Valhalla. With a crash, the Lord of Heaven's lofty hall collapsed, and the giants all around in the valleys of Thursenheim cheered so loudly that it rang through the heavens.

Then the gods, both Aesir and Vanir, were startled and paused in their strife. Now they realized for whose joy and benefit they had been fighting; above the flames, they extended their hands to one another in reconciliation and resolved to rule together in unity. First they exchanged hostages; after the castle was rebuilt, the Vanir went to Asenheim and the Aesir to Wanenheim as a pledge that they would keep the peace forever. Finally, however, all the Vanir went together to Asgard, and there they still dwell with Odin, Thor, and the others: a single race of gods."

"So Freyr also came to the Æsir?"

"So Freyer came to the Aesir. And that was good. For without

Freyr, it would not be easy for them to rule. It is Freyr who gives the earth its fertility, so that the meadows turn green and the cornfields ripen. He gives prosperity to the cattle, so that they multiply into countless herds. And he blesses the people, so that they may have children and grandchildren, and their lineage may not perish.

Tyr is brave, Heimdall is faithful, Widar and Bragi are valiant, Balder is the brightest of all, but none among the heavenly ones is as mighty as Odin, Thor, and Freyer. They are the highest among the gods. Warriors and princes pray to Odin; farmers pray to Thor; everything that breathes prays to Freyer for prosperity.

Freyr is great and handsome in appearance: his hair shimmers around his head like bright flames, and his eyes shine deep blue like the summer sky when the sun is at its highest at noon. But Freyr's heart is as tender as that of the Aesir.

In Alfheim, the realm of the light elves, he dwells beneath the treetops of the Ash. There is neither winter nor storm there. The sunshine lies still in the sparse groves, the meadows shimmer with colorful flowers, and their fragrance fills the realm of the light elves. When it rains, the rain falls gently and warmly upon the fields, and soon the sun peeks out from behind the clouds again.

Freyer, the Wane, is a skilled sailor. But he does not sail the waves down on Earth. His ship, Skidbladnir, the Bright Wave-Steed, rushes through the blue sea of the sky, and the sail swells like the white clouds drifting above.

In Freyr's stable stands a boar with golden bristles, named Gullinbursti. Freyr rides the boar through the skies. The boar runs on short legs, rolling away like a golden ball in the distant heights. Then the rider and the steed shine so brightly over the land that it hurts your eyes when you look up.

"Goldmane" is the name of Freyer's horse, which leaps higher than any other. But Freyer prefers to ride the boar.

Freyr's wife is Gerd, the giantess's daughter. From far away, from ice and snow, he brought her to Freyr, and she tends the fire at his hearth. Skirnir, the radiant messenger, his servant and companion, helped him most of all. This is how it happened:

Once, Freyr had taken his seat on Odin's high seat, on Hlid-skjalf, the thundering throne. He gazed far out over the world. Then he saw in the east, far in the Thursen Mountains, a woman walking across the glacier. That was Gerd, the Proud, the daughter of the ice giant Gymir. A radiance emanated from her bare white arms, lighting up the land. It seemed to the god that he had never seen anything more magnificent. Desire seized him for the woman, and his heart grew heavy: the gods and the Norns were enemies; how could he win Gerd from Gymir, the Grim?

Freyr no longer came to drink with the gods in Odin's hall. He sat alone, gently sad, in Alsheim and could not forget Gerd. Then the Aesir and Vanir wondered why Freyr, the Joyful One, kept his distance from them, and they commanded Skirnir to ask Freyr what was troubling him.

Skirnir stepped before Freyer in the high seat and spoke:

> "Tell me, Freyr, guardian of the gods, what I long
> to know:
> Why do you sit alone in the desolate hall,
> spending long days in sorrow?"

Freyer lifted his head from his chest and spoke:

> "Freyer can tell no one of his sorrow, The heavy
> grief of his heart;
> The shining sun, it beams upon all the gods, But not
> upon me with love and joy."

But Skirnir replied: "Since time immemorial we have been companions and have remained faithful to one another. You may well confide your sorrow to me."

Then Freyer told him how he had seen Gerd on the glacier, and that he could no longer let her go.

Skirnir spoke quickly: “I know Gymir’s home, my lord, from my messenger journeys in the East. I will win Gerd for you, if it will make your heart glad again. But I need your weapons and your horse. For all around Gymir’s homestead blazes the Waberlohe, a terrible fire; giant dogs run restlessly around the fire and guard the house, and Gymir, Gerd’s father, is a mighty Thurse.

Lend me the steed that carries me over
the flames In a steep leap.
And the whistling sword that strikes of its own accord, When
wielded by a fearless man."

Then Freyer unsheathed the sword from his side and gave it to him.

Skirnir stepped into the stable, patted the horse on the neck, and said:

“A perilous ride lies ahead of us both. Far off, we’ll cross damp rocks to the frost-giants. But:

"We fight together, we die together. May the dreadful
Thurs fall upon us."

Riesenheim’s shepherd sat on the hill outside Gymir’s farmstead beneath the glacier and blew his pipe. Below him, the herd grazed on the slope and in the valley. Then a rumbling came from afar; a cloud of dust rose along the path and rolled closer. A helmet glinted from the cloud, a horse raced toward him—and Skirnir came galloping on Goldmane.

“Where are you going, hero?” called the shepherd from the hill.

Then Skirnir reined in his snorting steed in the meadow.

“I’m riding to Gymir’s Hall!”

“Then you’re riding to your death!” cried the shepherd; “how do you plan to reach Gymirsheim with the raging hounds and the crackling fire?”

Then Skirnir sat up straight in the saddle and spoke:

> "To dare is better than to fear For the man
> who journeys far;
> My day is set for the hour of death— A wretch is he
> who loves life too much!"

He galloped on, and the shepherd of Niesen shook his shaggy head behind him.

In Gymir's hall, the maidens were spinning. The fiery embers glowed and danced, and the dogs howled from outside. Among the maidens sat Gerd, the Proud, on a high chair, boasting:

"I shall remain a maid, unmarried and free, as long as I live. Who among all who live dares to woo me? Who will extinguish the flames that blaze around Gymirsheim? Who will compel Gerd to follow him as a wife? I laugh at the gods above, on their shining thrones and their power!"

Then a thunderclap rang through the house, making the beams tremble. As if lightning had struck, there was a crash—and all fell silent. Frightened, the maids huddled together in the innermost corner of the hall. It remained deathly quiet; no more roaring fire, no more howling dogs around the house!

Gerd strode to the hall door and flung it open. There stood a man in the courtyard, helmet on his head, tying his horse to the fence, and the giant dogs were wagging their tails around him. Then Gerd was startled too.

"Who are you? Are you a god? Is it you, Odin himself, that the flames subside before you?"

"I am not Odin," said Skirnir; "but I am a companion of a god, Frey's, the Mighty One's messenger!"

"What does Freyr want from me?" cried Gerd, standing up in the doorway.

"Frey sends you a friendly message. The god has looked upon you with gracious eyes and wishes to take you as his wife. He offers you precious bridal gifts: eleven apples from Idun's

chest, which shimmer like gold, and gleaming rings that uncoiled from the world-hoop itself, Draupnir, the Tear-Bringer!"

"I have no need of Freyer or his gold!" cried Gerd. "My father has enough treasures in his chests!"

"Beware, Gerd!" said Skirnir, raising his gleaming sword, "as sharp as the edge of this steel is the wrath of the Aesir, lest it descend upon those who scorn the gods!"

"I am Gymir's child!" cried Gerd, "I want nothing to do with Freyr or the gods!"

Then Skirnir took a step back, and his eyes

.

"As you wish, so shall it be! You separate yourself from the gods—so be separated from the gods: live on, forsaken by the gods! You want to be free—so be free: I release you to the fiends! In dark caves, in the home of night and ice, with those you have chosen for yourself, the monsters of the deep. But let no one who joyfully lifts his head into the light have anything to do with you!

> Odin is angry with you, Asathor is angry with
> you, Freyer, the Prince, is your enemy:
> Rejected woman, the mighty wrath of
> the gods has come upon you!
>
> Three runes I carve for you, fateful ones:
> Restlessness, Powerlessness, and Fear—
> They shall follow you wherever you flee: So I
> wish and so I will it, woman!
> So you wished and willed it, woman!"

Then Gerd trembled in every limb, her pride was shattered, and she bowed her head.

"Come in," she said to Skirnir, "and take the libation cup as a greeting. I was foolish to harden my heart in defiance against the almighty gods. Blossom Grove is the name of a grove on the mountainside below. There I will await Freyer, if he desires me."

Thus Gerd became Freyer's wife and went to the realm of the light elves among the Aesir. But some believe it was Freyer himself who courted her in Skirnir's guise.

On winter nights, we boil the Yule boar in honor of Freyr and Gullinbursti. Then, any true hero steps forward to the steaming boar and swears by Freyr what deeds he intends to accomplish in the coming year. And as gentle as Freyr usually is—he punishes harshly anyone who breaks that oath. He seeks happiness and prosperity in vain, and a terrible fate awaits him in the underworld among the dead.

"Fro" is what the men in Saxony called our Freyer; in their language, that means "Lord." And Frouwa, the Lady, was the name they gave to his sister: our Freyja!

Freyja has power over the hearts of men; she stirs love in the breasts of men and women, so that they think they cannot part from one another. We also call her Mardoll: "Sea-glow"; for a soft radiance shimmers around her, like the sea when it lies smooth in the twilight. Her hair and brows glint gold-red, and from her neck flashes Brisingamen, the exquisite jewel. With light steps Freyja walks through the hall of the gods, so that the floor resounds as if a harp were playing.

In calm weather, Freyja rides across the blue sky in a golden chariot drawn by two large, spotted cats. Softly and swiftly the cats run through the fields—only their purring and panting can be heard very softly, as if a light breeze were stirring the leaves.

Freyja also has a feathered cloak; when she throws it on, she turns into a falcon and soars away. Only by her divine eyes can she still be recognized—they remain with her, like the heart in her chest, in every form.

Freyja has her seat at Volkwang, the field of the people. There stands Seßrymnir, her vast hall. After their deaths, Freyja gathers all noble women around her in the hall; and half of the heroes whom Odin has carried up from the battle

by his Valkyries—he assigns them to her; he knows that she loves the warriors, and they fare no worse there than they do with Odin. But when there is a feast among the gods in Valhalla, Freyja, together with Thor's wife Sif, pours the sweet mead and the foaming beer into the tall horns for them. Then it tastes twice as good to the gods."

"Freyja is beautiful," said the housewife, bent over her embroidery, "that is why all the merry heroes praise her, of course. But whether one can rely on Freyja, I do not know. Love often strikes me as strange, the love that Freyja stirs in the hearts of men, as fleeting as fair weather. What once sounded like a nightingale's song soon echoes like a cat's hiss. And many a fierce quarrel has sprung from passionate love—kin-slaying and treachery!"

"The hearts of men are hard to guide," said Hakon. "He who thinks only of how to live out his desires and not of how to establish a proper marriage to preserve his house and lineage does not submit to the will of the gods. Freyja herself is faithful. When her husband Odd was lost in the distance, she traveled through all the lands to seek him, and wept bitterly when she found him nowhere. But all the bitter tears that Freyja wept turned into pure gold. That is why it is said: faithful as gold!"

The woman looked up.

"If gold is faithful, then Freyja would certainly be the most faithful of all. For many say she was Gullweig—Goldflut, the Wanin—who roamed the world before the War of the Gods. And even if that is uncertain, Freyja, Freyr's sister, the daughter of Njörd, has enough treasures and gold to be the most faithful of the faithful when it comes down to it."

"What is the name of the god, cousin, who is Frey's father?"

"Njörd," said Hakon, "that is the one I told you about, who led the Vanir army in the war against the Aesir. Njörd is a stately man with powerful shoulders, a broad beard, and a well-proportioned figure. His dark eyes gaze calmly

blue eyes. Njörd the Rich is he called, for he is a good host; full are his chests and chambers.

In Noatun, the home of ships, he dwells on the seashore. When the storm howls across the sea, and he calls out with his mighty voice over the waves, they heed him and fall silent. That is why the sailors pray to him. But Ran hates him, the wild one.

After the War of the Gods, he took Skadi, the daughter of the Thurs Thjazi, as his wife in Asgard. But he did not choose her; rather, she demanded him from the gods as her husband.

Thjazi, the storm giant, had once won Jdun, the mistress of apples, from the Aesir through trickery. The gods snatched her back from him. Then Thjazi roared like an eagle toward Asgard, but the gods had lit huge pyres all around their gates, and when Thjazi tried to fly over them, the flames shot up at him, and with his feathers singed, he plunged dead into the embers.

Skadi, the Bold, stormed into Asgard with flashing eyes and demanded vengeance from them.

Then the gods smiled when they beheld the young woman, so fiery and so daring, and they took pity on her youth. Thor took the eyes of the dead Niesen and hurled them into the sky; there they still shine down as stars to comfort the daughter. And Odin promised her a husband among the gods. They blindfolded her with a cloth and told her to choose. From beneath the cloth, she peered secretly at the ground; there she saw two wooden feet, flawlessly shaped. “I choose him!” she cried, thinking it was Balder, the Light One. But it was Njörd.

Right from the very beginning, things did not go well for the two of them. Skadi and Njörd were far too different. Njörd loved nothing more than to sit on the seashore and gaze silently out over the waves. Skadi, the wild one, wanted to stay in Thrymheim, the thunderous mountains of the Thurses, where storms roar through the gorges and avalanches thunder down the steep slopes. There she runs through the forests in a wolfskin, on snowshoes, with bow and

spear through the forests and hunts until her cheeks turn blood-red and her eyes blaze.

At first, Njörd and Skadi tried to switch their dwellings. For nine moons, Njörd remained in the mountains; for three moons, Skadi sat with him on the shore of the sea. But they did not like that either.

Njörd said:

> "I've been in the Thurs mountains for nine days now—
> I've long grown weary of it—
> Instead of swans' cries from the foaming shore, only wolves'
> howls in the forest!"

But Skadi said:

> "I cannot sleep on the foaming shore: The birds make such a racket!
> The seagull wakes me at dawn With its ugly, shrill cry."

So Skadi and Njörd parted ways, and each lived on their own.

But before Njörd came to the Aesir, he had another wife, the mother of Freyr and Freyja. She is said to have been his sister. But that was so long ago that our bards no longer know her name.

The ancestor told: on the islands in the sea and along the coasts, where the Danes dwell and further west the Frisians, there they had still known Njörð's wife. In the spring, when the snow had melted away, and the meadows turned green again and the forests, then was their sacred time. There was a grove on Zealand, the great island of the Danes; there stood her temple by a lake, and in the temple was her chariot. It was rolled out to the shore by the priest's servants; it was drawn by oxen, draped with tapestries, and crowned with flowers. Then the heavens opened above, and the goddess herself floated down, so that the blue radiance of the sky shone over the green earth; she climbed into the chariot and drove, radiant, from place to place. In colorful festival robes, people streamed out of all the houses and

4'

huts, men, women, and children followed her, so that it was as if a living human spring were rolling through the blooming meadows, and their cries of joy echoed around the goddess. For wherever Njörðr's wife had passed in her chariot, there the fields bore abundant fruit in summer. But when she had returned to the lake in the grove, she ascended once more into the heavens; the chariot was washed by the servants, and then they were all drowned in the lake."

"Why did they drown the servants, Uncle? They hadn't done anything wrong!"

"Because they had touched the sacred chariot, they belonged to the goddess, and that was her will."

"Then Njörð's wife was a cruel goddess, sir!" said Smart the Old, shaking his gray head. But the housewife said:

"Perhaps the Danes and Frisians misunderstood her, Swart. We, too, used to sacrifice people to the gods. My ancestor told how they used to break the backs of prisoners of war at Thor's sacrificial stone. Among the Swedes in the east there is a temple of Odin; the place is called Uppsala. There, on the god's feast day, servants and prisoners of war were hung from the trees in the sacred grove in his honor: hundreds of them hung there, swaying in the air as the wind swept through the woods. Flocks of black ravens circled like dark clouds above them and descended upon them, cawing, to feast. But the gods do not want us to slaughter and strangle them, we know that now, and the Swedes have long since stopped doing it as well."

"We still know one among the Manes," said Hakon,
"one most holy god: Hönir, the old man. When the gods created the first human couple, he helped them, even though the Aesir and the Vanir were still enemies back then; he gave humans the mind to explore the world with their thoughts, and the soul to sense what lies beyond. But this god is so ancient and holy that

his nature is veiled from us, like the things on the edge of the sky, even when the sun glimmers above them. We know only that he, too, later came to the Aesir as a hostage, and that, like Njörd, he likes to sit by the water and takes pleasure in the swans, the prophetic birds. It is said of him that he will be the only one among the old gods to return after the end of the world."

Swart the Elder shook his gray head.

"You have told us much, Chieftain Hakon, about the gods of the heavens," he said, "but you have said nothing of other powerful beings; they do not exactly belong to the Aesir, yet we revere them almost as gods. For it would be a miserable life for us humans without the sun and moon, without day and night."

"Indeed, Swart," said Hakon, "Nott, the Night, is of a dark race of giants. Her face is black, and she is shrouded in black veils from head to toe. She has risen from the dark depths of Thursenheim. Norwi, the Grim, the tyrant of the Thursen, is her father. With her dark veils, Night covers all secret things, murder and treachery. 'Night is no man's friend,' they say. But I do not believe that is entirely true: Nott's mother must surely have been of nobler blood than her father. For the night does not merely cover up wickedness; she also pours her darkness over the eyes of the sorrowful and the weary, so that they may forget their suffering and their troubles until morning and sleep.

When you step outside your front door late at night and everything is dark and still, with only the waterfalls rushing down from the mountains, and stars shining down from the dark sky everywhere, so that you feel the gods' presence more clearly above you, then it dawns on you: there is something sacred about the night after all.

And then Night, the black one, gave birth to Day, the friend of mankind: the shining day! He rises in the east across the world when his mother goes to rest in the sea. Thus they follow one another eternally and never catch up with each other.

Nott and Dag ride across the world in a chariot.

A giant black stallion is Nott's steed. When it rises into the air, its shadow casts darkness upon the earth. Hrimfaxi, Frostmane, is its name; its shaggy mane glistens with frost, and that is the only thing about him that sparkles. When Nott climbs into the chariot, takes the reins, and drives the stallion up into the sky, Hrimfaxi grinds his teeth so that foam drips constantly from his bronze bit. Thus the dew falls into the valleys.

But Dag's horse is a fiery gray. His name is Skinfaxi, the stallion with the shimmering mane. When the light rises in the east, one hears him neighing and snorting far across the mountains, and his mane glows like a beam of light. Until, in the chariot behind him, Dag, the youth, shines forth with laughing eyes, and all is bathed in light.

For the sun and the moon, too—those mighty discs of fire from Muspelheim—the gods had the dwarves forge companions, so that they might roll along easily and be guided safely on their way across the sky.

Mani is the name of the moon's driver, a slender, radiant youth: he stands upright at the front of the chariot and shakes the silver reins. But the moon-steed, bright as the glow of its disk, draws invisibly through the heavens. Two fiery stallions snort at the sun's chariot, Arwakr, Early-Riser, and Alswid, Much-Strength. They strain every fiber of their strength and pant as they pull the mighty celestial body across the sky, and yet the two of them can barely manage it. Sol, the maiden with flushed cheeks, a halo of rays around her brow, urges them on, and her head veil flutters and glitters in the wind behind her.

But Sol and Mani do not travel across the sky without sorrow. Two are descended from Fenrir, the World-Wolf—they too are wolves, and no less great and fierce than their father: Hati, the Hater, and Skoll, the Destroyer. A wild marsh lies far to the east, in the Iron Forest, the primeval forest. There Fenrir dwelt, before the gods bound him, with a giantess,

as old as the forest's oaks and as wrinkled as their bark, black as the water in the marsh. This giantess bore him the brood. Like dark mists, Hati and Skoll rose from the swamp between dark firs and crept up toward the sky. Skoll creeps after the shining sun, Hati after the milky-white moon, and they lie in wait to hurl themselves howling upon the heavenly bodies and devour them. That is why the sun and moon never stand still: they know that their stranglers are always creeping after them on silent feet.

And just as the sun and moon, just as day and night up in the sky, so do two mighty beings down below traverse the earth in eternal succession. Swasud, with his gentle breath, the giant of the air, is the father of summer. With rosy cheeks and joyful eyes, his son Summer strides through the land. Wherever he treads, flowers sprout far and wide from the meadows, and grain sprouts from the earth. No hut is too small, no little servant too lowly, that he would not throw open his door to welcome Summer, the joyful guest.

But the father of winter is called Windswal, the Snorting One. He blows the frost here from the glacier mountains. There, in the cold wind, Summer's rosy cheeks turn pale, his eyes grow dim, and with his head bowed, he departs to the end of the world, to await his time there once more. Then Winter strides down from the glaciers, his white beard full of icicles that clink against one another. All the ice giants roar with delight and march with him, so that the forests rumble with their mighty footsteps. The rivers halt their flow, the waters freeze solid. And then the army of snowflakes sweeps through the cold air until everything on earth turns white.

But the German men say that in the dark winter clouds dwells a witch, Hulda, the Veiled One; when she shakes her bed, the feathery curls scatter down to the earth, and that is the snow. She must sleep in a cold bed, I suppose.

Then there are also animals in Asenheim, Erik, faithful companions of the gods, which is why they, too, are sacred. I have

told you: of the gray gelding Sleipnir, Odin's eight-legged steed; of Goldzopf, Heimdall's gleaming racer; of Freyr's steed; of Hufschnell, the cloud-stallion of the Gna; of Schimmermähne and Reifmähne, who ride up the day and the night across the sky, and of Frühwach and Vielstark, the sun's chariot. This is a splendid band of tail-swishers, neighing joyfully in the stables of Asgard.

I have also told you of Frey's golden-bristled boar and of Heidrun, the heavenly goat on Valhalla's roof, from whose udders the sweet mead flows for the heroes. But not yet of the stag that grazes with the heavenly goat on the roof. Eik-thyrnir is his name, Oak-thorn, for just as the oak stretches its mighty branches, his proud antlers reach high and far with their points, jagged and sharp as prickly thorns. Their tips vanish into the gray clouds, where the cloud dew drips from the antlers and flows through the air down into the underworld. There is a deep well there, the boiling cauldron Hwergelmir, which overflows with the moisture of the clouds, and thunderingly the streams of the underworld, the tormentors of the dead, roll in all directions through the darkness; for the waters are as sharp as frost, plunging high from the sky like cutting iron. But Eikthyrnir, the stag, gazes down from the clouds with his yellow eyes and takes pleasure in how mightily the waters roar through the underworld, dripping down from his gleaming antlers.

But what Heimdall is among the gods, that is Gullinkambi, the rooster, among the animals: the guardian of Asgard. At the crack of dawn, his golden crest glitters above the mountain peaks; he shakes his plumage so that it shimmers far across the sky, stretches his neck from his chest, and crows with a loud clamour. Then the gods awaken, and the heroes of Valhalla leap from their beds. Proud is Goldkamm, the alarm clock, of his sacred duty: all the Aesir rejoice when the rooster strides across the courtyard in the colorful splendor of his feathers, and the goddesses scatter golden grains abundantly for his food.

Goldkamm has a brother in Thursenheim: Flammenkopf

is his name, the fiery rooster. But in the underworld dwells the third of the brothers: Soothead, the black rooster, among the dead.

When the three roosters once crow together so shrill that it echoes from heaven to the underworld, then, so it is said, everything that inhabits heaven and earth dons its armor, and Ragnarök, the end of the gods, begins...

Now I have told you at length of the gods, Erik, and yet I have forgotten one: Loki, the villain. This is, of course, no surprise. Loki may count himself among the Aesir, yet he has little of the Aesir's mind or blood.

Farbauti: Schlagetot, the storm giant, once thundered through the world amid thunder and lightning, crashing down upon a lonely island in the sea. There, beneath a canopy of green leaves, sat Laufey, the lovely one, also called Nal, slender as a fir needle: the goddess of the island. Furious, he seized her and dragged her away to Thursenheim. Laufey bore a son, who sprang into the world like a flame bursting from a fire crackling beneath the roof. And that was Loki.

Loki is as beautiful to behold as the glow of fire; his red curls blaze around his head like tongues of flame. But his eyes glow erratically with secret fury. Loki is cunning, and he knows well how to disguise himself. Everything that lives in the air and on earth obeys him.

With quick glances, Loki looked around Thursenheim, and he did not please him in the ice-bound wasteland among the shaggy giants. He had winged shoes, on which he could walk through the realms as easily as across the earth. So he soared above the clouds to Asgard.

There the gods sat together beneath the crown of the ash tree, deliberating and murmuring about the fate of the world. Then Loki stepped among them in his radiance: with fiery words he praised the works of the gods and offered to help them. Not all in the council of the heavenly lords approved of him, and some believed he could not be trusted. But they needed the lord of

flames to complete the world, and so they accepted him as a blood brother among them.

But that was the beginning of all the misfortune in the world, and I think it would have been better if they had listened to those who did not want him. Things would likely have worked out just fine without Loki.

Loki set to work eagerly and aided the gods with wise counsel and swift action. The Aesir called him Lodur, the Blazing One, because of his fiery appearance. But it was Lodur, Erik, who set out with Odin and Hönir in primeval times and created mankind from Ask and Embla, the whispering trees, as I told you. Lodur-Loki gave them the fire of life and the glowing blood.

Then the Aesir came to trust him and held him in high esteem.

They gave him Sigyn, the faithful, caring woman, as his wife. She raised two sons for him in Asgard, Nari and Narfi. And Loki loved her dearly.

But soon the Aesir realized that things were no longer
things were no longer right among them.

Freyja reached for her necklace, the precious Brisingamen, when Goldkamm's rooster's crow awoke her. There her neck was bare. She went to Heimdall, the guardian of the heavens, and told him of her sorrow. All day and all night long, Heimdall peered out from the gate into the whole world. Then, early in the morning, at dawn, before the sun had risen, he saw it: on the Alpine cliff, the towering island of Thursen in the sea, it glowed from the rock like colorful fire. Mounted on Alis, the golden-maned steed, Heimdall rushed through the air. But as he leaped from the stallion, a giant dark seal emerged from the water and snatched the jewelry down into the waves. Then Heimdall threw himself into the sea and turned into a seal himself. For a long time, amid shrill cries, the two sea creatures fought each other in the waves. Finally, the thief let go of the loot and dived down into the depths.

Then a murmur spread among the Aesir: it was Loki who had stolen Freyja's necklace that night.

Once, the weary guardian of the heavens had dozed off in the midday heat before the gate. When he awoke, his sword had been stolen from his side. The Aesir do not know who it was, but they suspect it well, and one day, when the gods fight on the last day of the world, it will become clear who wields Heimdall's sword against him.

Thor was on a distant journey to the east to slay the ice giants. Then Loki came to Thrudwang and sat with Sif, his wife. He drank sweet mead to his heart's content with the lady of the house and spoke flattering words. But when Sif fell asleep, Loki crept into her chamber and cut her long golden braids clean off her head.

Rarely had Thor been so furious as when he returned home and saw Sif, the wronged woman. He stormed through all the halls of Asgard and seized the villain. Loki writhed in Thor's fists and begged for mercy: he would create new hair for Sif, even more beautiful than before, and he promised the gods rich gifts as atonement for the rest of his life. So they persuaded Thor until he released him."

"And did Loki then keep his word to the gods, Uncle?"

"He did, Erik. The most exquisite jewels and the most magnificent weapons of the gods come from Loki. But it was not easy for him to procure them. He climbed into the dark chasm to the dwarves, the bearded master craftsmen with gnarled fists and stocky arms. Like hissing little flames, his fiery hair blazed through the darkness everywhere in the caves, until he found the sons of Jwaldis, the Mighty One; he commanded them to forge three marvels, or else he would let the flames die out in their forges.

So they set to work with groans, and from the fire rose, like a golden web, shimmering and more ethereal than before, the hair ornament for Sif. They threw gleaming ore into the forge and tugged at the bellows until it hissed: then Frey's airship Skid-bladnir rose from the flames with silver sails—at first no larger than a little cloud floating on the edge of the sky, yet it swells so swiftly and mightily like

the cloud in the wind, when its master commands it, so that a hundred men and more may sail within it. And winds of his choosing steer it wherever he wills.

Jwaldi's sons pulled harder on the bellows; the fire blazed brighter, and Gungnir, Odin's sacred spear, rose with a clang from the embers, its tip sparkling. It never misses its mark when the god draws it.

Meanwhile, however, other dwarves had come running in droves from the caves all around; they watched, heads craned forward, as Jwaldi's sons worked. Brokk, the short-legged one, stood among them, as nimble as a badger slipping into the dark crevices, and Sindri, his brother the Slag-man, the sooty dwarf. Loki loudly praised what Jwaldi's sons had brought to light: no one else could create such magnificent works. Then Brokk, the badger, winked at the slag-man with his squinting eyes; they laughed scornfully and wagered with Loki that they would forge three things in the shortest time: if they were not better than what Jwaldi's sons had wrought, Loki should keep them. Loki, on the other hand, put his head up as a pledge.

The brothers ran into their forge. Sindri quickly threw a mighty boar's hide full of gold and ore into the forge and told Brokk to pull the bellows. Brokk pulled with all his might, and Sindri stood before the embers and stared into them. A fly buzzed up in the glow of the fire, landed on Brokk's right hand, and stung him—and they say that was Loki, the Deceiver, in the form of a fly. But Brokk did not stop his work. Then there was a snorting and grunting from the forge, and Gullinbursti, Frey's golden-bristled boar, leaped out, glowing, into the flames.

Sindri and Brokk laughed joyfully, and now they cast pure gold, already once purified in the fire, into the embers. And once again the fly buzzed over, and this time it stung Brokk in the neck, so that a burning sensation shot through him all the way to his toes. But still he endured and continued. Then a ray of light pierced the dark cave, making it as bright as day, and in the fire

lay Draupnir, the Dropper, the World Ring, which now glitters on Allfather's arm.

"Much has been accomplished!" cried Sindri, "now, Brokk, take care that we do not fail at the end!"

Hard, gleaming ore, dug from dark bogs—a massive lump—they rolled it into the forge. And Brokk pulled on the bellows until the cords nearly snapped. Then a fly settled on his eyes, right between his brows, and stung him so that blood ran down. Brokk screamed loudly and let go of the cord. But already Mjölnir, the mighty hammer, shone, perfected in the fire: Thor's lightning-bearer, the terror of the Thurses. The handle was just a little too short.

Then Loki stepped into the forge. "Magnificent are these treasures," he cried, seizing them, "I have lost my head to you dwarves! Take it!" he shouted, and, laughing, soared away on his winged shoes. He distributed the gifts among the gods, and thus he had regained their favor.

Brokk and Sindri, the dwarves, came to Asenheim lamenting and demanded Loki's severed head from Odin. But Loki called out that they should only take it if they could do so without injuring his neck. Then Thor seized him, holding him fast in his chair, and to Loki's shame, Brokk and Sindri sewed his blasphemous lips together with pins and string. When Thor let him go, Loki angrily tore out the string, so that blood dripped from his mouth, but he had to endure the gods' laughter.

But Loki's most shameful deed was that he once secretly fled from Asgard and joined a giantess by night: the fiercest woman in the darkest depths of the Thursen Mountains—Angrboda, the harbinger of woe! For woe she truly would bring upon the world.

She bore terrible triplets to Loki, the wicked one.

You already know one of them, Erik, Loki's son: that was Fenrir, the wolf, whom the Aesir barely managed to bind at the gates of heaven.

No less terrible was Loki's daughter: the giant Midgard Serpent at the bottom of the World Sea. She rolls her iridescent

body down below, encircling the Earth, so that its shaggy head, with its white fangs and treacherously flashing eyes, stares up from the fins of its tail.

> In the bosom of the sea the serpent lurks With a
> body encircling the land,
> its skull crouched upon its shimmering tail, ready to leap
> upon the world.

Thor's enemy is called the Midgard Serpent. Nothing does Thor hate as much as this abomination at the bottom of the sea; often his thunderhammer has struck the sea at its head, so that the water hissed high, and one day, when Ragnarök dawns, he will fight the final battle with it.

But the most dreadful of all monsters is Hel, the Pale One, the ruler of the dead. Her hall rises on the shore of corpses, in Nebelheim beneath the earth. There Garm, her giant dog, barks in the courtyard on a rattling chain, his shaggy chest drenched in the blood of the wicked: he tears them down with a howl as they creep, weary and pale, through the gate of death. Hel's hall is vast; the princess looms darkly in the darkest corner of the high seat, tall and gaunt, with dull eyes, her pale face mottled with decay.

> A hall dawns, far from the sunlight. To the north,
> the door to the beach of the dead:
> Poisonous rain rushes into the chimney, Inside,
> dragon worms writhe.

Hela's voice echoes hollowly through the house, and what she commands is torment.

From Hwergelinir, the boiling cauldron, torrents of thunder around Hclhcim's hall. There the multitudes of the dead must wade in the frost-sharp waters, and their groans and howls echo louder than the roar of the torrents.

Fortunate is he who dies a straw death, and may linger, joyless and tormented, upon the bench.

And yet it is not Fenrir, not the Midgard Serpent, not Hel who cause Odin, the All-Father, the greatest concern.

There is one of whom God knows this: when the fiends and monsters rise up against the heavenly hosts, he will lead the sons across Bifröst with a flaming sword, so that the bridge of the heavens shatters with a crash beneath the thunderous hooves of the steeds. For still, as in times of old, the realm of fire blazes and roars far to the south, and at the border of Muspellheim sits Surt, the Black One, the naked sword in his fist, peering out from the flames with greedy eyes into the world, wondering if his hour is not at hand..."

A crash echoed through the hall. The women in the back
, and Erik turned on a dime.

"A guest this late!" cried Hakon, "Go see who it is, Haward!"

The servant at the door jumped up, pulled his leather cap over his head, and grabbed the axe beside him. Then he pushed the bar aside and opened the door cautiously, the door handle firmly in his left hand, the axe in the other. The storm rushed through the crack, snowflakes swirled into the hall, and a deep voice called from outside:

> "Hail to the day and the people of the day, hail
> to the holy night!"

"Skeggi, it's the neighbor," said Hakon, "let him in, Haward."

A man stepped into the hall, dusted with snow from the hood of his loden coat down to his leg warmers. He shook himself and threw off his coat. Tall and broad-shouldered, he stood there and brushed the snow from his red beard. His blue eyes laughed and his white teeth flashed.

"Greetings to you too, neighbor!" Hakon called out, holding out his hand, "sit by the fire, snowman, and warm up! Gudrun, fetch the mead jug and let's have a drink!"

Skeggi, the farmer, sat on the bench next to the chieftain's chair

chief and rubbed his frostbitten hands. Erik moved close to him.

"The weather is terrible, sir," he said, "I barely managed to find my way here through the snowstorm! Back home, everyone has crawled under the blankets and pulled them up over their ears. So I thought I'd come see, sir, if it might be more entertaining here."

"Welcome, Skeggi!" said the housewife, setting the tall tin jug on the table between them. She filled their massive mugs with mead. "May it do you good!"

Skeggi raised the mug and drank thirstily. Then he looked around.

"What's the matter with you lot back there?" he called out to the servants, "why are you hanging your heads and looking as if the cat had got into the lard pot!"

"Chieftain Hakon has spoken of grave matters, Skeggi," said the housewife, "of the monsters that lurk everywhere in the depths, of Surt, the Black One, the Prince of Flames, and the end of the world. That is likely why they have grown so gloomy."

Skeggi shook his beard.

"It is a long time until the world's end, as long as Chieftain Hakon and I live, and even longer for those in the Northlands who remain faithful to the gods and do not fear the fiends! I drink this in honor of Thor, the slayer of the Thurses!"

"And I raise it to Odin, the Lord of the Gods!" said Hakon, lifting his tankard.

"Odin is indeed the Lord of Heaven," said Skeggi, "but that is no reason why men should esteem Thor, the Mighty, any less than him. You can tell that by the many honorifics with which they call the slayer of the Thurses: he is called Asathor, the Thor of the Aesir; Wingthor, the Hammer-slinger; Öku-thor, Chariot-thor; Hlorridi, the terrible Shiner! Without Thor, my lord, Odin could not stand. Just as the princes cannot do without the peasants."

Hakon smiled.

"You farmers are proud, that is well known!"

"Should we not be proud, my lord? We are free and bring forth from the earth the grain that feeds us all. Should not everyone be proud in their station, even the servants over there, if they serve their master well and faithfully? For we cannot do without them either. Only when the farmer wants to be a prince and command armies, and the servant rules the household, and no one honors the other in his station anymore—only then does what stood upright in the world become crooked, and it falls apart. But without Thor, the god of the farmers, Odin alone could not keep the giants in check. You could see that by how the gods were startled when Thor lost his hammer!"

"What was that, Skeggi?" Erik said quickly, "Tell me, Skeggi!"

"Once in Thrudwang, Thor awoke at dawn and, as was his custom, reached straight for the hammer under his pillow. The hammer was gone. Wingthor flew into a rage and leaped to his feet. He stamped through all the rooms and chambers, searching. Sif ran over in alarm to help him. But the hammer was nowhere to be found.

"Go to Loki, the Cunning One!" whispered Sif, "and ask him secretly for advice. Loki still often consorts with his old companions, the Thurses. Perhaps he knows something!"

Then the god grumbled and rumbled into his red beard so that the beams in the house shook. Empty-handed, without the hammer, he trudged through Asgard's halls until he met Loki, out in the courtyard of Valhalla.

"Listen, Loki, hear what I have to say," Thor growled:

> "Woe betide if it becomes known throughout the world: Hlorridi's hammer has been stolen!"

Loki threw his head back so that his long, flaming hair fluttered, and gazed into the distance.

"Let us go to Freyja," he said softly, "she shall lend me her feathered

so I may fly through the worlds to see if I can spot your thunderhammer."

So the two of them journeyed to Volkwang.

Freyja, the joyfully adorned one, sat in her high seat, and before her on the benches all her heroes were having their morning drink. Freyja listened intently.

"You should have my feathered shirt to seek Thor's hammer, even if it were of silver or pure gold."

Then Loki threw on the feathered shirt and soared from Asgard's courtyard as a falcon. Glinting in the sunlight, he whirled into the mountains of Thursenheim.

Thrym, the Thunderer, lord of Thursen, sat before the house on the hill, his skull with its shaggy hair like a moss-gray boulder between his mighty shoulders. He wove golden collars for the dogs, who crowded around his knees, wagging their tails. He whistled to the horses in the pasture, combed their manes with a golden comb, and laughed to himself so that it boomed from his chest like from a deep stone cave.

"Thrym has always been rich, but tonight he has become richer than rich." Then he sniffed the air with his mighty nostrils.

"I wonder if they've sensed it up there yet!"

Then there was a rush above him; a falcon plunged down from the sky, and Loki leaped out of its feathered cloak.

Thrym's eyes flashed maliciously, and he twisted his face into a sneering grimace.

"How are the gods faring, Loki? What's new in Asgard? What are you looking for, Loki, in Thrymheim?"

"The Aesir are in a bad way," cried Loki, "and you know it, Thrym! Thor's thunderhammer has been stolen! Where, Thrym, have you hidden Thor's hammer?"

Then Thrym roared so loudly that the horses scattered across the hill.

"I have Thor's hammer! It was no easy task to steal it from Thrud-steal it away from beneath the Aesir's head. Eight fathoms

deep it lies in Thrymheim beneath the ground, so that no one may take it! And never again shall the gods see it, unless they bring me Freyja, the joyful one, to Thrymheim!"

Evening fell in Asgard. Thor had long been standing before Thrudwang's gate, peering eastward to see if Loki was coming, and his right hand twitched, accustomed to grasping the hammer. Then the falcon swooped down from a distant height, small and dark in the twilight, like a shadowy little cloud.

"Stop, Loki," Thor called out to him hastily, "deliver your message right from the air. Have you found the hammer?"

"I have found it!" cried Loki, the falcon, hovering in the air above Thor with fluttering wings; "it lies eight fathoms deep beneath the ground in Thursenheim, so that no one may retrieve it, and you shall never see the hammer again unless you bring Freyja, the joyful one, to Thrym, the Thurs!"...

Freyja was sitting at the evening meal in Volkwang's hall when Thor strode into the hall. He stepped before the goddess, shook his beard, and looked at her with his glowing eyes.

"Freyja, quickly!" his call rolled through the hall, "throw off your bridal veil; I'll take you to Thursenheim tonight on my goats. Thrym wants you—then he'll return the hammer!"

Freyja leapt to her feet in the hall: her veins swelled so that Brisingamen burst at her neck and the jewels clattered across the floor. Her blue eyes darkened like the night sky, from which the stars flash.

"May the gods and men curse me as a fool if I ever go with you to Thursenheim to that ice-cold giant!"

Thor roared dully. But Loki, the Cunning One, quickly pulled him out of the hall.

No sooner had dawn broken, and before Goldkamm, the rooster, had crowed, Heimdall blew his horn. The Aesir and the Vanir and all the goddesses hurried to the council, the Thing beneath the canopy of the ash tree. And more than a few looked on in horror when they heard that Thor's hammer had been stolen by the ice giant

Thrym, and what ransom he demanded. A flurry of talk and murmuring arose among them, until Heimdall, the Wise, stepped forward into the circle of the gods.

"We cannot do without Freyja, the joyful one," he said, "any more than we can do without Mjölnir, the hammer. Thrym is fierce, greedy, and mighty: but he has little sense in his head. Let us send him one in Freyja's place: bind the bridal veil around Thor's head and clothe him in women's garments. That will make a stately bride for the giant!"

The Aesir cheered loudly. But sparks flew from Thor's furious eyes.

"I will not let myself be wrapped in women's clothes," he growled, "lest I become a laughingstock throughout the world!"

Then Loki scolded him loudly before all the Aesir.

"Would you rather lose your hammer, and have mountain trolls and ice giants dwell in the halls of Asgard?"

Now Thor let the Aesir women dress him. Fulla placed a tall headdress upon his crackling fiery hair, and she tied a thick veil around his forehead, which fell long over his flaming eyes and fiery red beard down to his lap. Hlin tied a bunch of jingling keys to his robe, and Freyja herself, now reconciled, adorned his mighty chest with chains of precious stones.

Loki drove the bearded goats out of the stable, swung himself into the chariot disguised as a maid, and seized the reins. There sat Thor, grim and broad, beneath the bridal robe in the chariot.

The journey went into the clouds.

Mountains blazed, the earth split open:
Odin's son rode into the realm of the ice giant!

In Thursenheim, Thrym leapt from his seat, ran to the hall's doorway, and listened intently. A dark roar and thunder approached through the air.

"Freyja is coming in Thor's goat-drawn chariot!" he roared joyfully. "Rise from your benches, you servants, prepare the wedding feast!

> Horses and cattle graze by the stream for me,
> raven-black one, the giant's pride; I have
> treasures, jewels in my halls—only Freyja, the
> woman, was still missing!"

It was night when the goat-drawn chariot thundered up to the courtyard gate, and the mighty bride, deeply veiled, entered the hall with her maid. Inside, the giants had gathered from all the valleys, from near and far, to see Freyja and feast at the wedding banquet. They stared in amazement at the bride, who sat upright and silent beside the shaggy giant, no smaller and no less broad-shouldered than he. They had not imagined that Freyja would be so powerfully built.

Now the Thursen servants brought the feast in on massive platters. A whole ox, gigantic, like those that graze in Thursenheim, sea salmon and delicacies, boiled and roasted meats. And they set everything before the bride so that she might be the first to taste it.

So she reached out and ate the whole ox, she alone, and all eight salmon, and she also wolfed down all the delicacies together. Then she grumbled muffledly from beneath her veil, grabbed the towering jug standing before her—three barrels of mead barely filled it—and emptied it in one gulp down to the dregs.

Thrym was startled, and everyone sneezed along with him.

"Never have I seen brides eat so heartily at a feast!" he cried.

> "Never have I seen women eat so voraciously, nor
> girls drink mead so heartily!"

Then the maid leaned forward—she, too, had a veil over her face—and said:

"For three days, Freyja ate and drank nothing out of sheer impatience and longing to come to Thrymheim!"

The giant was pleased to hear this; he put his arm around the bride's shoulders and gently lifted her veil to kiss her.

Then she suddenly turned her eyes toward him, and Thrym leaped from his chair and staggered back against the wall.

"Freyja's eyes are terrible!" he groaned. "I thought lightning was leaping into my face!"

But the maid quickly spoke: "Her eyes are parched. That comes from the fire in Freyja's heart: for eight nights she lay in Volkwang, without sleeping, out of sheer longing to come to Thrymheim!"

"Then bring Mjölnir here," cried the master of the house, "and place it in the bride's lap, so that the hammer's blessing may not be missing from the marriage."

Then Thor's heart laughed within his chest as he beheld Mjölnir, his faithful companion, upon his knees.

He tore the veil from his face.

There, standing in the midst of the giants, was Asathor, their enemy, the terrible god. A clap of thunder boomed, and Thrym rolled under the table with his skull split open. With a crash and a flash, the hammer swept through the hall until all the Thurses lay shattered on the floor.

Thus Thor retrieved the hammer from Thrudwang."

"Thor is terrible in his wrath," said Swart, "and rightly so: for he who spares the giants achieves little against them. But Thor is good if one does not offend him. And he is not haughty toward those of lower station. He has often sat at table not only with farmers but also with servants, and has not spurned their food. But he loves children above all. He showed that when he spared Thjalfi and Röskwa."

"Go ahead and tell us, Swart, how it all happened!" said Hakon, "Erik's eyes are already shining with anticipation."

"With your permission, my lord. This is how my father told it to me. Egil was a farmer who lived at the end of the world in the Thursen Mountains. He had two children. Thjalfi was a nimble lad who, though small, helped his father wherever he could. And Röskwa, the lively little maid, ran with her mother through the kitchen, the chambers, and the cellar. One evening they sat late by the hearth fire. Then

a heavy storm was brewing over the mountains. Lightning flashed across the entire sky through the darkness, thunder rumbled through the air, and the rocks cracked.

"Be still now," murmured Egil the Old: "Thor is rolling in battle with the giants!"

With trembling arms, Röskwa clung to her mother, and Thjalfi stared wide-eyed out the window.

Suddenly a flash of lightning lit up the room as if it were ablaze; it struck with a crash, right in front of the fence, so that the whole hut shook. The door flew open—and standing on the threshold, towering in a bluish glow, the thunderhammer in his fist, was Asathor himself.

Behind him, steam rose from the earth, and darkly loomed in the the mist.

Egil bowed down to the ground before the god. A muffled roar came from Asathor's mouth:

"Give me shelter, farmer, tonight! The feast be plentiful."

He led the goats by their crooked horns into the room and raised the hammer above their heads: then they fell down as if struck by lightning.

"Skin the goats for me, farmer, with your servants! And quickly boil the meat in the cauldron. That will make a delicious meal. But take good care, for your lives' sake, that no one damages the hides or a single bone!"

So the farmer, the farmer's wife, and the servants set to work quickly They set to work. And soon, huge bowls of rich, fatty goat meat in a spicy broth were steaming on the table. Thor sat on the high seat between the farmer and the farmer's wife, the servants around them, and they all helped themselves as much as they could. For it is not often that a farmhand or journeyman gets to feast on Thor's goats at a table with the master."

The farmhands smiled and looked at Smart.

"But at the very back of the table sat Thjalfi with Nöskwa, and no one paid them any mind. Thjalfi had secretly fetched a thigh bone from the kitchen and showed it to Röskwa. She thought it would be good to try the marrow inside. So Thjalfi plunged the knife into it and split the bone open. Quickly, the siblings slurped up the fat so that no one would notice, and Thjalfi put the bone back in the kitchen with the others.

Then they all slept very soundly together after the hearty feast. But early in the morning, Thor leaped from his bed, and his rumbling echoed through the house, waking everyone.

Thor now strode into the kitchen. There lay the skins of the goats spread out across the floor, and carefully stacked beneath them were all the bones and little bones. Thor swung his hammer three times over them. Then the shaggy skins rose with the horns, the bones stretched out and fitted together, and suddenly the goats leaped toward Thor, their master, alive and fresh, with mighty bleating. But Tanngrisnir, the Grinder, dragged his hind leg behind him as he limped.

Then Wingthor's face grew as dark as storm clouds; he drew his bushy brows down low over his sparkling eyes, and his fist clenched the hammer so tightly that the blood drained from his knuckles.

"Who has broken my little goat's leg?" his cry rolled through the hall.

"Who sucked the strong marrow from the bones?"

Trembling, the servants fell to their knees, and the farmer offered all his possessions to the husband as atonement.

But when Thjalfi and Röskwa saw that everyone's lives were at stake, they crept forward in fear and stammered a confession of their crime.

Thor looked down at them grimly and silently, but gradually, as he saw their fear and because they had at least confessed the truth, his dark brows lifted again, and his face softened.

"You are still small and young in understanding," he muttered into his beard; "so you shall be spared. But as atonement, follow me as my servants for all eternity!"

He raised his hammer over them and leaped into the chariot with the snorting goats. With a roar, he drove up into the heavens, and with him a whirlwind swept the children up into the air.

Now, whenever Thor rides across the sky, Thjalfi leaps ahead of him, like a flash of lightning before a storm. But what flickers and glitters behind as the thunderclouds roll by is the gleam of the clasps on Röskwa's breastcloth and belt—she runs along behind the team of goats."

"That's a lovely story about Thor," praised the housewife. "I had no idea that the Angry One was so fond of children, but I'm happy to believe it. For the fiercest heroes in battle often love children the most. When I was a girl, barely as tall as this table here, I knew of nothing better than to run to my father's master-at-arms, the gray-haired Bard. He was a fighter like no other, and the scars covered his body as thickly as the pockmarks on Heimar's face. The men feared him. Early in the morning, you could already hear him rummaging and scolding. But when I came to him, he would lean his spear against the corner, and a smile would spread across his wrinkled face: he taught me the most wonderful games and told me the most wonderful stories. But what I liked best of all was how Loki flew to Geirröd in his feathered cloak and lured Thor to the giants.

"Yes, Loki would have come to a bad end there," said Skeggi,
"and if you don't want to tell it yourselves, I'll tell it to Erik; for I love, my dear, to speak of Thor's adventures and his glory, I freely admit.

Geirröd, Erik, was a mighty giant up in the glacier mountains. There his castle shone with golden gables all the way up into the clouds. No human foot had ever climbed there, and not even any of the gods had ever sought refuge in Geirröd's hall

. Everyone knew that Geirröd was a stingy host and an enemy of the gods.

One day, Loki flew over the mountains in his feathered cloak. He alighted on Geirröd's golden gable and peered, head tilted, through the chimney down into the hall. There sat the grim prince with his giant companions at a feast, stroking his ice-gray beard. The Thurse looked up at the chimney and muttered:

"Silence, you fellows! A bird sits on the roof and listens. I'd like to catch it! Get up from the hearth, Odd, you lazy servant, and fetch me the falcon!"

Then everyone fell silent, and the servant crept to the door. With his long arms and legs, he slowly climbed across the rafters onto the roof like a giant spider. Loki saw his shaggy head peeking over the eaves, and he laughed secretly to himself:

"Before you, you oaf, can grab me, I'll be long gone!"

There lay the giant servant, his whole long body stretched out over the roof, and suddenly he reached out with his clawed hand toward the bird.

Quickly Loki, the falcon, ducked; he flapped his wings high and pushed off from the perch—but his feet stuck fast to the pole, and the giant fist held him captive above the jaws.

The servant carried the falcon before his master. Silent, with ruffled feathers, Loki sat in the giant's fist before the prince. Geirröd immediately recognized that this was no ordinary falcon.

"Your eyes sparkle far too sharply, falcon," he cried. "Speak, who hides within this skin?"

But Loki remained silent, only his gaze flashed toward the prince.

"Then lock him in the empty chest in the chamber!

> Hunger has often subdued pride; thirst has taught humility!"

For six moons Loki sat imprisoned without food or drink;

weak and emaciated he grew in the dark box from hunger and from longing for Asenheim's bright fields. Then one morning he raised his head and spoke to the servant:

"Take me to the prince!"

Geirröd laughed scornfully when he saw the falcon.

"Have you gone mad? Will you now confess, bird, who you are?"

Then the falcon straightened up, and his voice rang out clearly:

"I am one of the Aesir: Loki, the Blazing One, the Lord of Flames!"

"I've made quite a catch," Geirröd grinned. "So you really are Loki! Now listen, Loki, you'll never get out of this box unless you swear to me that you'll bring Thor, the slayer of the Thurses, here—without Mjölnir, the Mal-mer, and without the steel gloves for battle!"

The falcon sat for a long time, his head tucked between his wings. Then he sprang up.

"Let me go," he cried, "I'll bring you Thor!"

Thor sat in the sunshine before Thrudwang's hill, and before him the goats grazed on the slope. Then he saw a falcon flying from afar from the mountains of the Thursen.

"Is that you, Loki?" he called; "what news do you bring from Thursenheim?"

The falcon landed from the skies, shook out its feathers, and Loki stood there.

"Geirröd sends me, Asathor," he said in a flattering voice. "The Lord of Niesen has heard much of you, and he longs to see you himself, to know if you are truly as strong as he has been told. He invites you as a guest, Thor! Green paths and gentle trails lead to Geirrödsgard, and one feasts and drinks splendidly in the high hall. Just leave your hammer at home, Thor, and the steel gauntlets. Otherwise the giantesses will be frightened and think you've come to kill them."

"I've heard little praise for Geirröd as a host!" grumbled Thor; "Are you not lying, Loki?"

But Loki swore that he had spoken the truth.

There the two lords of Thrudwang walked down, clad in splendid ceremonial robes of gleaming silk, embroidered with colorful trimmings.

It was already dusk; the Thursen Mountains loomed before them, and far above, one could see the path winding through rocky heights and steep gorges into the clouds, which hung thick and heavy over Geirröd's glacier fortress.

"You spoke to me of green paths and gentle trails, Loki!" Thor rumbled. He glared grimly at his companion from the side and strode silently upward through the dark fir forest.

There, high up at the edge of the forest, where the rocky gate gapes before Geirröd's glacial realm, sat a mighty giantess: it was Grid the Faithful, Widar's mother, who once sheltered Odin from the Thurses when he came to her in ancient times without weapons.

"Are you going to Geirröd's hall, Thor," she cried, "in your festive garb to your treacherous lord? You will hardly return from there without a fight! Take my mountain staff here to wade through the gentle waters; take the steel gauntlet from me and fasten my belt of strength tightly around your hips."

Armed, Hlorridi passed through the rocky gate, and Loki walked close at his side. Night had fallen. The clouds rolled down over the heads of the Aesir. The storm howled, the clouds burst, and the torrents crashed down. The rocky streams roared over the cliffs and swelled into torrents: the entire gorge became a raging sea. The water rose above the Aesir's hips. Loki reached for Thor's belt and held fast to it in the swirling eddy. But Thor planted the Grid's staff into the ground and called out in a booming voice through the roar:

> "Do not rise, Wimnr, wild waters, do not bar
> Wingthor's path!"

But already the foam was lapping at his chest. Then Loki grabbed him from behind and hastily pointed upward over his shoulder.

Up there on the ridge between the jagged peaks, two fiery eyes glowed through the darkness, and long, shaggy locks hung gently down over a giant face. It was Greip, Geirröd's eldest daughter; she sang so that it howled like the storm through the gorges, a magical song from on high: at it the waters seethe and roar.

Wingthor reached into the stream, tore a massive chunk of rock from the bottom, and hurled it—and then Greip's death cry rang out, and she sank behind the ridge.

Silence fell suddenly upon the air, and the waters in the valley swelled and receded.

The morning dawned gray. There the castle wall loomed before them in the gateway, and from the shreds of cloud above the golden gables glowed.

Hlorridi stepped up to the gate and struck it with his fist. Then the gate burst open, the castle shook, and weapons rolled down the walls of the hall.

Geirröd leapt wildly from his seat inside.

"That was Asathor!" he muttered; "Away with you, servants! Gjalp," he called to his daughter, "to the place I showed you!"

Geirröd sat alone in the hall when Thor entered, followed by Loki.

"You are early guests at Geirrödsgard, gods!" he growled at them, "but welcome! Sit down, Thor, in the high seat opposite me."

His eyes darted treacherously beneath the chair.

Then the chair beneath Thor rose from the floor and soared into the air. The runners scraped against the rafters under the roof. The god braced Grid's staff against the ceiling and, snorting, pressed down with all his might.

There was a crunching sound, a crash like bones snapping, and a howl rang out.

The chair hurtled from the ceiling to the floor—and beneath Thor's chair, the giant Gjalp writhed in a pool of blood, his limbs shattered.

Geirröd roared fiercely, leaped to the hearth at the back, and snatched a huge iron wedge—red-hot and pointed—from the fire. With both hands, he raised it above his head and hurled it at Wingthor. But Thor caught the hissing weapon in mid-flight with Grid's steel gauntlets and hurled it back. There it smashed the giant's skull, so that Geirröd crashed to the ground, and the red-hot iron wedge drove deep into the ground behind him, smoking. White smoke billowed and filled the hall; crackling, it glowed through the rafters to the roof; flames leapt up over the gable, and as the sun sparkled over the ridge, Geirröd's castle on the glacier blazed in the fire.

Then Thor looked around for Loki.

"Loki, you liar," he growled, "it was no gentle path you led me down, and it was a terrible feast that Geirröd prepared for us. But now I have repaid him with fiery gold!"

Thor became famous far and wide for this battle with Geirröd in heaven and on earth, and yet it was by no means his most glorious deed!"

"What, then, was his most glorious deed, Skeggi?" asked Erik.

"His most glorious deed, Erik?" said Skeggi, running his hand through his beard, "that is not easy to say, my boy, for Thor has already accomplished so much and so great. But I think, how he tore the Midgard Serpent up from the bottom of the sea—that was a mighty feat even for Thor:

Once, all the gods, hungry and thirsty from the hunt in the forests of Asenheim, gathered at the bottom of the sea in the Glass Hall of Ägir, the sea giant. They intended to have a merry drink and feast heartily. But Ägir was in a foul mood, and Ran, his wild wife, slipped away from the house with a wicked look.

“Give us something to drink, old man!” Thor shouted, stepping menacingly before him.

“How can I serve so many at once?” Ägir grumbled,
“First bring me a brewing cauldron, big enough for all the gods to quench their thirst from!”

Of course, that was not so easy to come by, if it was to satisfy the enormous thirst of them all.

Then Tyr stepped up to Thor and said:

“I know of the cauldron, comrade-in-arms. My father Hymir, the giant on the island in the Arctic Ocean, has it. When he brews in the fall for the winter, the steam rises far out over the waves, so that one might think the mist is swelling up all around from the sea. So great is the cauldron—not only the gods, but the whole world could quench their thirst from it.

“Your father, the giant, will not give it up!” grumbled Thor.

“We’ll win it with cunning!” said Tyr.

So Thor harnessed his goats and rolled with Tyr through the clouds out to the distant island in the Arctic Ocean.

The Arctic Ocean is a dreadful wasteland, Erik. It’s frozen solid all winter long, as high as a house. Then only the storm howls over it. And bears as white as the snow, twice as big as the brown ones in the forest, roam about and sniff to see if they can sense anything alive. But when the ice sheet shatters in the spring, the waves from the sea crash as high as the mountains. The mightiest giants dwell there on the islands—the mountain giants are mere children by comparison—and they call the white bears their little dogs. If a man is cast into the realm of the Ice Sea, his mind grows so confused, as if he were wandering through fog: here he was a man, there he is a little boy. He no longer knows what is small and what is large.

Thor and Tyr drove there in a team of goats until they
Mir’s island. On the southern tip, a farmer lived alone on the beach. The old man was pleasantly startled when he saw the gods

roaring through the air. For rarely did gods visit this island, and he had never seen Thor, the hammer-wielder, before. They left the goats with him, and the farmer led them a long way along the beach to Hymir's hall.

"I am known here," said Tyr as he caught sight of the farmstead, "but I take little pleasure in my father's clan."

They entered the hall, Tyr leading the way; it stretched out almost endlessly before them in the Dümmer. Suddenly, a bright light shone in, and from the inner chamber stepped forth the All-Golden One, Asm, Hymir's wife and Tyr's mother. Her face flushed with joy when she beheld the gods.

"Hail to you, fellow countrymen!" she cried, "Welcome, son! Welcome, Asathor, slayer of the Thurses!"

She brought them beer in mighty mugs and shimmering mead in a jug. So they sat together, feasting and drinking, and the gods had much to tell her of Asenheim and their companions until evening fell. Then the All-Golden sighed.

"Now my old man will soon return home from fishing. He is not accustomed to good manners. He is usually rude to guests and in a foul mood. Hide for a while over there in the corner behind the wooden pillar until I have spoken with him."

Heavy footsteps boomed from outside, the door flew open with a crash, and the master of the house stuck his shaggy head into the hall.

He had come from fishing; chunks of ice clinked, and
his shaggy beard was frosted over.

Sniffing the air, the giant bellowed:

"It smells awful here; it doesn't smell of sea salt or fish oil! Woman, who do you have in the house?"

"Rejoice, Hymir," said the All-Golden One, "Tyr, your son, has come to us. And he has brought the mighty Thor with him, his friend. The two of them are resting there behind the pillar in the corner."

The giant shot a furious glance in that direction, and the pillar buckled and burst. And from behind it stepped forth Thor and Tyr.

The giant was of great stature, yet he was startled when he suddenly saw Thor before him with the thunderhammer, the Thor-slayer.

"What do you want from Hymir?" he roared.

"We just want to borrow your brewing kettle, Father, to make beer for the gods at Ägir's," said Tyr.

Then the giant grinned.

"You can have the cauldron. But first you must prove that you are more capable and stronger than Hymir!"

And he shook his monstrous fists in their faces.

"Will you go out with me onto the sea and test your strength against mine in a contest on the waves? Put your heads up as a wager, and I'll put the cauldron up against them."

Hymir had three oxen slaughtered, one for each of them, and served them half-raw, dripping with blood, as they like it in Tyr's realm, before the guests. Such a feast, he thought, would not please them much. But Thor had worked up an appetite from the long journey; he dug in heartily and devoured two of the oxen, leaving nothing but the bones. Then Hymir furrowed his bristly brows and had to share the third with Tyr. That was a meager meal for the ogre.

Early in the morning, while the stars were still twinkling through the clouds racing across the sky, he roused the guests with a clatter.

"Up, you gods! Off to the sea with you to go fishing!"

Thor was up at once and demanded bait from the giant.

"Everyone here gets their own bait!" grinned the ogre, "go out into the forest; the herd grazes there, and there is meat. But watch out, Thor, for my cattle are a bit wilder than the oxen in Asenheim!"

Thor quickly ran out into the forest. There, at the edge, stood the ice giant's bull, pitch-black in the dawn light. He bellowed hoarsely when he saw Wingthor, and he pawed the ground with his front

hooves, sending dust flying; he snorted and lowered his sturdy horns. But Wingthor leaped at him, grabbed him by the horns, and twisted his head so that his muzzle was pointing upward. For a long time, the god and the bull stamped their feet in a furious struggle. Finally, however, Thor tore the bull's head from its neck with a mighty jerk.

The giant grew wild as Thor stepped into the boat and silently threw the bloody head onto the floor, so that the planks shook.

"Gone is my darling, the leader of the herd," he snorted,
"You bring me nothing but terror and harm, Thor!"

Angrily he seized the oars, and the boat flew through the waves as if driven by the wind with sails. Only on the high seas did he stop, lowering the trawl net into the waves, and already it tugged and pulled fiercely. Panting, the giant pulled the catch up to the edge of the boat, and Tyr and Thor helped him valiantly. They were two mighty whales, dark wave-pigs of the sea, thrashing about in the net. Hymir smashed his axe down on their heads and threw them into the boat; there was still room in the giant's vessel, so massive were they.

Then Wingthor seized the oars, and the boat shot across the waves like a seagull in a storm. The giant grew anxious.

"Stop, Wingthor!" he cried, "No one who breathes may go any further; you are driving us into the Mceröde, Thor, where the skull of the World Serpent lurks at the bottom of the sea!"

But Thor swung the oars until the distant shore of the island sank into the sea behind them and nothing remained around them but the surging sea.

Then he lifted the bloody head of the Niesen bull from the deck with his left hand, drove the anchor hook into the skull with his right, and lowered the bait.

Then there was a jolt that tore the boat's edge down to the water. Hymir jumped up in fear at the stern, and Tyr threw himself to the other side of the vessel. But Thor braced his knee against the gunwale and hauled the anchor rope out of the depths with both hands.

Mighty bubbles roared as if the sea were beginning to boil: two jets of water hissed upward, and from the sea, attached to the anchor's hook with shaggy bristles, the World Serpent's hideous head shot forth! With its bleeding maw wide open, it raged and hissed, spewing its venom, its treacherous eyes blinded by the glare of the light.

The sea roared at the sight of the abomination. The earth, the ancient earth, trembled in fear: far and wide in all the forests, the wolves howled. From the halls of Asgard, the gods rushed to the gates of heaven and stared down.

Thor raised his hammer to strike. Then

the light in the skies went out.

Shaken by terror, the ice giant screamed and swung his axe through the rope.

Then the serpent darted back into the flood, and the sun emerged shining once more in the sky.

Disturbed and silent, Hymir sat at the helm as Thor rowed the boat home from the fishing trip. But when he stepped onto solid ground, he regained his defiant courage.

"Which do you think is harder, Thor, to carry the boat alone up into the shed, or to drag the mighty whales to the dwelling? Choose the easier task!"

Silently, Thor reached for the boat with his left hand and pulled it up. Then he threw both whales over his back by the rope and dragged them into Hymir's dwelling.

But the fierce Thurs still would not give up his brewing cauldron. "You are mighty strong," he said to Thor as they sat at the feast in the hall, "I won't deny that! But there is one thing, I think, that you cannot do. Behold this wine goblet of clear crystal, the most precious treasure of the Thurs: if you have the strength, Thor, to shatter the goblet, then the cauldron is yours!"

The god thought the challenge foolish; it seemed easy enough to him to shatter the glittering glass.

He raised it above his head and hurled it against the pillar, 6*

where it clattered through, and whirled back unharmed into Hlorridi's hand.

Then the All-Golden One stepped behind Thor and whispered secretly into his ear: "No wood is so hard, no stone so rigid, that Hymir's magic glass would shatter against it. Hymir's skull is harder than wood and stone!"

Then Wingthor grabbed the drinking glass with both hands and hurled it at the ice giant's rigid forehead, shattering it into shards.

Wailing, Hymir leapt from his chair and rubbed his skull.

"Robber!" he roared, "fierce Aesir! You have torn apart my bull, my favorite, and broken my drinking glass, that beautiful one
— take everything that gladdens Hymir's heart! Drag the cauldron out of here too—if you can."

The bronze cauldron stood tall on the wooden floor at the back of the hall. Tyr stepped forward. But no matter how much he tugged and yanked, the cauldron did not budge.

Then Asathor seized it with his right hand by the rim at the back, tipped it over, and hoisted it onto his head. He strode upright with powerful steps out of the hall, Hymir's cauldron on his back, the handles clanging at the top of his neck and at the bottom around his ankles.

But the Aesir had not yet wandered far along the beach when Tyr called out from behind:

"The giants are coming!"

Thor set the cauldron down gently and turned around. Wild shouts roared, and the ground thundered. Hymir came running, his hair blowing in the wind, a mighty boulder in his fist. And behind him, the Nieses, his companions and kin, rushed down from all the hills in bright armor, hurling stones at the gods.

Then Thor raised his hammer, and as many giants as there were, so many lay shattered on the shore. Mjölnir, the Malmer, spared not a single one.

Full of strength, Asathor returned to Ägir with the brewing cauldron

Hymir's. There a splendid feast was prepared for the gods, and ever since then they have been drinking their mead every autumn in Ægir's hall at the bottom of the sea. At night, it glitters up from the depths, so that the waves above shine as if in liquid fire."

Erik took a deep breath.

"But why didn't Thor quickly kill the serpent so that Hymir could no longer help it?"

"That was not to be," said Skeggi, "it would have been against the decree of fate; for the serpent is to lie at the bottom of the sea until the end of the world comes. It was already against the will of the Almighty that Thor pulled it from the waves, and the Bright Day beheld its hideous face; that is why the sun went out at once. And that is why it is said: No one has ever defied fate except Thor, when he tore the Midgard Serpent from the depths!"

"You are right, Skeggi," said Hakon, "that time the god was indeed successful. But Thor did not always emerge unscathed from his battles."

"I know what you mean, my lord," said Skeggi, "indeed, the splinter from Hrungnir's throwing stone still lodges in Thor's forehead. But it was precisely there that he proved how much the gods needed him. And he also helped Odin, the Prince of the Gods, out of grave distress, I believe, my lord—please do not take offense!"

"Who was Hrungnir?" asked Erik.

"Hrungnir, the club-wielder, was the strongest among the mountain giants, just as Thor, the hammer-wielder, was among the Aesir. Hrungnir's skull was made of stone, and the heart in his chest was also a stone with three pointed corners. Not even Thrym, the Thunderer, the hammer-thief, was as mighty as he.

Once, early in the morning, Hrungnir sat in front of the farm gate. The sun shone down into the valley, the dogs barked in front of the house, and the horses neighed in the pasture. Then Hrungnir raised his head; above him, a high-pitched sound whistled and rang through the air from the blue sky. The giant stared up in amazement: far

in the blue, a white horse snorted, a golden helmet glinted, and a spearhead flashed.

"What echoes from the blue? What glitters from on high?" cried the giant: "Who rides in the sky wearing a helmet?"

Then the white horse stood still up there in the air, the dogs in front of the house fell silent, and a clear voice rang down from on high:

> "Odin rides, the first of the Aesir,
> across the sky in his helmet:
> My steed neighs from the roar of the clouds, Sleipnir, the swiftest stallion!"

Suddenly Hrungnir leaped from the rock, and he shouted fiercely: "The Father of the Gods above the Thors Mountains! My horse is swifter than Sleipnir, the Glider, in the heights of heaven. I'll catch Odin and drag him home in chains!"

He swung himself onto the black steed and roared upward.

The air grew dark, and huge shadows rolled blackly behind the light, which faded far away over the heights.

But Sleipnir was not so easily caught. Over Thursenheim, the god and the giant chased one another, and light and shadow followed them over valleys and peaks. They stormed across Midgard, the land of men: Hrungnir, bent over the horse's mane in furious rage, swung his whip with a whoosh and did not notice how the golden gables of Asenheim were already glimmering and rising above them in the blue.

At the gate of Valhalla, Odin had galloped in on Sleipnir, and the gods surrounded him, cheering. Then Hrungnir thundered toward them like a storm cloud.

Suddenly the giant black horse reared up, blinded by Asenheim's radiance, and the giant stared in bewilderment at the towering wall.

But Odin stepped out of the gate to meet him, the tip of his spear touching the ground as a sign of peace: he did not fear the

Niese" and intended to show him all the splendor of Asgard, that he might be frightened and amazed.

"Your black horse is not as fast as you thought, Hrungnir," he said with a smile; "but it is still a fine steed. You must be thirsty and weary from the hot ride. Be our guest and step into the hall for a drink!"

The giant peered suspiciously through his small black eyes.

"Is Thor at home, the slayer of the Thurses?"

"Thor is not at home," said Odin, smiling again;
"Thor is far away at the end of the world. There, he and Mjölnir are dealing with the ice giants."

Then Hrungnir leaped from the black horse and stepped into the hall.

Odin seated him in Thor's chair. All the Aesir and Asinn came forward for the festive feast. There, wherever the shaggy giant looked, he was dazzled by the radiance of the gods' forms and their bright robes. Sif herself, Thor's wife with the golden braids, served him the food, and Freyja, the radiant one with the joyful eyes, poured him beer and mead into Thor's horn. The grim giant ate and drank greedily, staring silently around him. But he looked especially at Freyja and Sif.

The more the goddesses served him, the more he gobbled and swallowed. Already the supplies in the chambers of Valhalla were dwindling, and the beer in the cellar was running low. Then Hrungnir became drunk.

He roared wildly and slammed his mighty fist on the table, so that the mugs and all the bowls tumbled about:

"You puny braggarts! You won't be dwelling in your golden halls much longer! I'll tear Valhalla from the mountain and sink it into the swamp along with all the gods! Only Freyja and Sif, the radiant ones, will I drag off to Thursenheim as maids!"

He reached out at them with his claws. The bowls shrieked shrill cries. The gods leaped from their seats, tore the weapons down from the walls, and called for the tamer of the Thurses: for Thor.

There was a clap of thunder that shook the hall; the hall blazed with blue light, and Thor stood in the glow on the threshold.

His red hair stood on end, and he swung Mjölnir, the hammer of Malm, in his fist.

The hall fell deathly silent, and Hrungnir slowly backed away to the wall.

“Who invited this fiend to Asgard?” Thor growled, raising his hammer. “Who seated the Thurs at the table?”

The giant threw both arms high above his head and roared:

“You will be called a shameful wretch throughout the world, Thor, if you slay the guest in Valhalla, defenseless without club or shield! I challenge you, Thor, to fight me in single combat in Thorsheim, if you dare!”

Then Thor lowered his hammer and looked contemptuously at the giant.

“Where am I to go?”

“Griotunagard is the name of a desolate field of rubble beneath a towering ridge on the border of Thursenheim against the Aesir. There I await you, Thor, in three days.”...

Hrungnir felt forlorn as he sat back home. All around him in the hall, his companions crowded in, asking how his hunt for the Lord of Heaven had gone. And they were startled when he sat there gloomily, saying nothing.

“You’ve returned without Odin! Were you with the gods in Asgard? Did they do you wrong?”

“I was a guest of the gods in Valhalla,” Hrungnir growled, “Thor wanted to strike me, so I challenged him to a duel at Griotunagard.”

Now the giants were even more alarmed, for fighting Thor, all alone without help, seemed to them a dangerous undertaking even for Hrungnir. They decided to provide him with a comrade-in-arms to stand by his side.

On the ridge above Griotunagard, they piled up a giant from massive boulders and clay. It was a marvel that only such mighty beings could erect. Standing on broad

feet, the figure stood on the ridge, and high above the clouds, its blocky head gazed upward.

They named him Mökkurkalfi, which means: Mist-Wader! For around his slender knees, the damp mists constantly swept across the windy ridge.

But Mökkurkalfi stared silently with round eyes over the peaks toward Asenheim: he had no heart.

The Thurses pondered for a long time, putting their bushy heads together and grumbling, whispering and deliberating over where they might find a heart for such a mighty lad. Finally, they slaughtered the largest of Hruugnir's mares, tore her heart from her body, and placed it in the clay giant's chest. Then it was as if they heard him babbling from above.

Early in the morning on the third day—white mists still lay down in the valleys—Thor came roaring through the dark clouds in his team of goats, and before him leaped swiftly Thjalfi, his messenger, with his gleaming spear.

From afar, Hrungnir saw them approaching in the sky. The wheels rolled, Thor's cries boomed, and red lightning flashed. Dark night fell over the ridge.

"Thor is coming!" Hrungnir shouted up to the clay giant:
"Look up, you weapon-wielding one!"

But the clay giant could no longer hear. With wide eyes, he stared into the flash of lightning, and the mare's heart trembled and leapt in his chest.

High above Hrungnir, Thor rode with his shaggy goats. Then Hrungnir dropped his club, seized a boulder, and hurled it at Thor. Amid the dark clouds, Mjölnir, the Malmer, struck the boulder. Then a flash of lightning lit up the entire Thorsen Mountains in blinding flames. Hrungnir's projectile shattered into two pieces; Mjölnir crashed through it and struck the giant's stony skull, shattering it. But a splinter from Hrungnir's shattered stone whizzed ringing up into the clouds and struck Thor squarely in the forehead.

The god tumbled from the chariot down onto the field of rubble. There Hrungnir rolled about, lashing out with his mighty limbs in his death throes.

The goats reared up in a frenzy and, without a driver, stormed toward Asenheim with the empty chariot.

Meanwhile, Thjalfi had run toward Mökkurkalfi with his spear drawn. But there he found nothing left to do that was worth the effort. His heart pounding so hard, the giant's massive form trembled from head to toe: Mökkur-kalfi leaned forward from the sky and plunged down toward the ridge. There was a crash and a rumble, and boulders burst from his body as if a landslide were sweeping down into the valley.

Now Thjalfi looked around for Thor. There he saw him lying stretched out in the rubble, a splinter of stone in his forehead, his grim face covered in blood, and across his neck lay, heavy as a boulder, the mighty leg of the dead Hrungnir. Thjalfi rushed to his master's aid and tugged and pulled at the leg. But he was far too weak to move the immense burden...

The Aesir were greatly alarmed when Thor's goats came running toward Thrudwang with an empty chariot. They seized their weapons and galloped on their winged steeds toward Griotunagard, so that the dark clouds dispersed in their wake. There they saw Thor lying below: his flaming beard and fiery hair sparkled against the rubble, and above him stood the little Thjalfi, bent low, tugging at the stone leg of the giant.

Everyone rushed over and tried, individually and together, to lift the burden; but the rock-gray leg shone immovably in the sunlight above Thor's neck.

Then, from behind them, Thor's boy Magni came flying through the air with his hair fluttering, leaped down before his father, and grabbed the leg. With a jerk, he tore it up and threw it far away into the rubble, so that the ground shook. He looked after it with contempt and said to Thor:

"Had you called me sooner, Father, I would
have struck down that lout with my fist!

Then all the gods marveled and rejoiced at such strength in a child and said:

'He will surely, when he grows up, be no less than his father!'

Thor, though wounded, sat with a grim face in Thrudwang and groaned, the splinter of stone lodged in his forehead.

Among the Aesir was one named Groa, the Kind One, who cared for the growth of plants in heaven and on earth and knew all the powers of herbs. That is why she was also called the Mother of Greenery: she was a healer and skilled in the arts of magic. When she heard that Thor had been wounded, she came to Thrudwang. Gently, in her light linen robe, she stepped before him and sat down in the chair. She raised her hands and sang blessings over the wound.

Then the pain receded from Thor's head, his grim face softened, and the splinter in his forehead loosened; already he raised his eyes gratefully to Groa and pondered how to repay her kindness.

Groa had had a husband, Aurwandil, the Fair: his eyes sparkled from his joyful face, like the morning star from the dawn's glow. Once he had journeyed eastward to the Thurses, and he had long since been lost.

Then Thor, the wounded one, sat up and spoke:

"I was in the East, Groa, on a distant journey among the giants, barely a moon has passed. There I met Aurwandil, your husband, the lonely wanderer, in a dark ravine before a roaring stream. He stood helpless on the rocky shore, and his white body glowed through the darkness. So I lifted him into the empty reindeer basket on my back and carried him across the roaring waters. But one toe of the divine hero jutted out of the basket, and in the biting icy air, the pale limb froze. So I broke the shimmering toe from his foot and

hurled it high up into the dark vault of heaven. And as it whirled out in a glittering arc, it became a star high above, sparkling down in a bluish glow. To comfort you and as a sign, Groa, the star shines. Before autumn roars through the forests, Aur-wandil will return to you!"

All the blood rushed suddenly from Groa the Good's heart to her cheeks: she leapt from her chair, and, bewildered by happiness, she had forgotten all her spells.

"So Hrungnir's stone splinter has indeed come loose, but it still trembles sharply in Thor's forehead."

"But doesn't Thor's head hurt anymore?" Erik hastily interrupted him.

"No, Erik, his head no longer aches, and I believe that a god like Thor is no more bothered by such a splinter in his forehead than a hero is by scars on his face: they bear witness to his glory!"

"Well, Skeggi," said Hakon, "I'm willing to believe that Thor isn't ashamed of the splinter in his forehead, since he smashed the mountain giant's stone skull with Mjölnir. But that Odin called to him for help because he couldn't have handled Hrungnir on his own—that doesn't make sense to me. Odin surely did not want to fight Hrungnir, the guest, despite his wickedness. That is why he called for Thor, for he had not invited him."

"Perhaps, sir," said Skeggi, "but Thor would not have called for Odin and would have dealt with the guest himself."

Chieftain Hakon's face darkened.

"Odin is wiser than Thor," he said slowly, "Thor sees only as far as his eye can reach, and strikes down whatever he finds unsuitable. But Odin's mind looks into the distant future, and he does not immediately hurl his spear at every enemy he sees."

Skeggi frowned.

"Thor is not as short-sighted as you think, sir.

Where Mjölnir, his hammer, can no longer prevail, he knows how to strike down his foe with a wise word. He proved this when he freed Thrud, his daughter, from Alwis, the prince of the dwarves!"

Hakon's face brightened again.

"Tell me, Skeggi," he said, smiling, "so that your Gölte may lack nothing in his glory!"

"Thor had been away from home for six moons, my lord. That long had he been dealing with the giants in the east. Meanwhile, Alvis, the all-wise dwarf, had courted Thrud, Thor's daughter, among the Aesir. He had come secretly, under cover of dark night. For the cave-dweller dared not venture into the daylight: he would have turned to stone in the sun's rays. He had brought rich wedding gifts; he had distributed magnificent gifts among the gods and goddesses: jewelry and weapons. So they had promised him Thrud as his wife.

In a rage, Thor threw his hammer to the ground with a crash when he came home and heard the news.

"Ice giants shall dwell in Asenheim before I let Thrud ride into the cleft to that light-shy dwarf!"

Then the gods were in a bind, for they had promised the bride to the little man with sacred oaths.

But Thor sat gloomily on his high seat in Thrudwang and waited for Alwis.

It had long since been night when wheels creaked and rattled as they approached, and Alwis, the Pale One, with his gray goatee, drove up in a gleaming little wagon. The tiny horses stopped before Thrudwang's gates, and their light manes fluttered in the moonlight. Alwis put two fingers in his mouth and whistled so that it rang out. Then he leaped out of the wagon and pounded on the door with his hairy fist. But nothing stirred.

Alwis furrowed his bushy brows, threw his weight against the gate with his shoulders, and pushed until it creaked open; he hurriedly squeezed through the gap.

There lay the hall before him, dark and empty. Only at the back did a glimmer—

A sliver of moonlight streamed in through the window: there sat Asathor, tall and silent, Mjölnir, the sparkling hammer, clenched in his fist on the table, and his fine red beard glinted in the darkness.

Alwis, the dwarf, however, knew exactly who it was.

"Where is the bride!" he screamed, his voice shrill; "I have come to fetch her to Alwisheim: he who waits too long becomes a fool!"

"Who is screaming so loudly here in Thor's hall?" rumbled a muffled voice from the high seat. "Corpse-nose, have you crawled out of the frosty mist-land of the dead? The daughter of the gods is ill-suited for a giant like you, who barely reaches her waist!"

"I am Alwis, the Wise!" the dwarf bellowed. "I have shimmering treasures in the dark caves, more than all of Asgard holds. I know everything that breathes and grows. I bought the goddess's wife from the gods at a high price for jewelry and weapons!"

"Who has the right to give away the daughters?" rumbled a voice from the darkness,

"Where was the father when the Aesir swore their oaths to you?"

"Who are you back there?" cried Alwis, squinting upward,

"Red-bearded fellow, you monster! What kind of ruffian growls like a bear in Asathor's hall?"

"Redbeard is my name, son of Longbeard, who wears the World Ring on his arm! Far and wide I travel through all lands and hold court beneath the sacred ash tree!"

Then the dwarf was so frightened that he trembled, and hopped quickly from one foot to the other.

"Are you Thor himself?" he cried; "Thor, give me Thrud! I cannot do without her in the dark chasm: white as snow the beauty shines, sweet is her long hair to behold, golden-yellow as honey, and her radiance does not burn like the cruel rays of the sun!"

"I will give her to you," boomed Thor's voice through the darkness; "but first show me, Alwis, how experienced you are. Everything

that breathes and grows, you know, you boasted. So tell me, Alwis, what is the name of the earth in all the tongues of the world, from Asenheim above down to Helheim below?"

Then the dwarf stood on tiptoe and spread his arms wide.

"Earth is its name in Midgard, All-Green among the giants, Path-Home among the Vanir, the dark blanket in Hel, but the Aesir call it Dung-Ground beneath the ash tree's crown."

"You have learned much, all-wise dwarf! What are the clouds called that drift across the sky?"

"The Vanir call the cloud 'Weather-Seat,' the Aesir call it 'Wind-Ship,' the Giant calls it 'Rain-Mist,' but Hel calls it 'Soft-Foot.'"

"You have learned much, all-wise dwarf! What is the name of the sea that bold men sail?"

"The Vanir call it 'World of Waves,' the Elves call it 'Salt Drink,' the Thursi call it 'Eel-Home,' but the Aesir call it 'All-Wide.'"

"What is the name of the night?" asked Thor.

"The giants revile her as 'Light-Stealer,' the elves call her 'Dream-Witch,' the Aesir say 'World-Mist,' but Hel calls her 'Death-Desire.'"

"What is the name of the sky," asked Thor, "that arches over the earth?"

"Hochheim in the realm of the Elves, Windweaver is its name, and Cheerful Roof among the Vanir, All-Enveloper in Asgard. But the giants in the Cloud Mountains call the sky the Rain Drip."

"What is the name of the changing star," asked Thor, "the moon that wanes and waxes?"

"Milchglanz among the Aesir, the Silent Wanderer among the Vanir, the Timekeeper among the giants, the Distant Disk among Hel's people."

Thus they spoke to one another in the dark. Thor asked about all things in the world, and the dwarf answered him, until the moonlight faded in the hall and the dawn light streamed in through the open door. Gullinkambi's first cry rang out from Valhalla.

Then Thor listened and said:

"Now tell me the last thing I long to know—and

Thrud is yours: What is the name of the sun, all-wise dwarf?"

Alwis recoiled with a shudder.

"The sun!" he stammered—and hissed: "The sun is hated in the realm of the caves! We call it 'Dwarf-Death'..."

Then Thor stretched himself in the high seat, and the hammer rang out in his hand. "Look up," he cried, "Alwis!

> Thor deceived you with lies all night long! Day has
> risen from the depths:
> The sun shines into the hall!"

Alwis spun around abruptly. Then the first ray of sunlight flashed into his face—and the dwarf stood frozen to stone!"

Skeggi smiled. Erik looked at him and thought.

"Why didn't Thor slay Alwis right away, if he was so insolent, neighbor Skeggi?"

"That would have been far too rash. The gods had, after all, permitted Alwis to come to Thrudwang to fetch Thrud."

"But why did the gods allow it?"

"They were after the jewelry and the magnificent weapons that Alwis gave them. So they promised him what they couldn't promise without Thor's consent."

"But that wasn't right!"

"It was wrong, of course. But even the gods are not able to remain free from wrongdoing at all times."

"Thor acted wisely here," said Hakon; "it was no easy task to free the dwarf's daughter and yet keep the Aesir's oaths. But Thor didn't always come up with good advice so quickly. When he was crouched in the giant's glove, Skeggi, he felt quite ill!"

"It was a trick, sir, played by that giant rabble!" grumbled the farmer. "And yet they secretly trembled before him, even when he was inside the mitten!"

Erik's eyes widened.

“Was Thor ever inside a mitten?”

“Yes, that happened once, Erik.”

“But how big was the glove, then, that Thor could fit inside it?”

“Well, it was as big as a farmhouse, Erik. And the giant was as big as a mountain. But that was a giant unlike any found in this land or anywhere in the world, not even up north in the Arctic Ocean. He was one from the realm of the Jötnar beyond the world, even beyond the edge of the sky. Thor’s journey was no less dangerous than Odin’s ride down to the dead, to Helheim.

Once, the Aesir and the Vanir were all feasting in Valhalla, and Bragi praised the deeds of the gods.

“Odin,” he sang, “is the first among the Aesir, Thor is the strongest in battle, Freyr is the most glorious under the sun. All that breathes is subject to them.”

Then Heimdall, the guardian of the heavens, shook his head.

“Far out I gaze from the gates of Asgard beyond the borders of the world. A land still lies beyond the bright edge of the world, with dark forests and towering glacier-capped mountains. There dwells the race of the Jötnar, beyond the world. No one has yet dared to journey there.”

Thor pushed the full tankard away, leaped from his seat, and cried, “Come on, Thjalfi, enough feasting! Out of the stable with the goats—we’re traveling to the Jötnar beyond the world!”

Then Loki rose from the table as well.

“Take me with you!” he said to Thor. “The journey is long, and I know the way. You will need me.”

The world ocean glistened far and wide in the glow of the evening sun, as Thor stood on the sandy shore at the westernmost edge of the earth. He ruffled the shaggy necks of the goats in front of the wagon.

“Jump back to Thrudwang and give my regards to my wife and servants. Now it’s time to sail across the waves!”

He stepped into the boat and took the oars with Thjalfi. But Loki

sat at the wheel and steered westward. Behind them, the land sank into the sea. The blue edge of the sky rang out like sounding glass as they approached it: it rose before them and let them pass through.

Then an icy wind howled toward them, and gray wisps of fog fleets flew like giant birds over the roaring waves.

> Nine days, nine nights the boat carried them, The
> storm wind screeched over the cold sea.

At last, Loki saw the rocky shore rising from the waters in the pale distance. But by the time they drew near, it had grown completely dark.

> It was night; the winds rustled on the shore, and
> the vast forest loomed darkly.

They climbed the steep slope and wandered through the thicket in search of a way. Not a single star glowed above, and nowhere did a firelight flicker in the forest. Then Loki came upon a cave, and when they looked closer, it was like the arched doorway of a house. Quickly, Loki and Thjalsi slipped inside and threw themselves, utterly exhausted, onto the floor. Thor, however, remained sitting in the doorway, peering out with his hammer in hand, full of worry: the house swayed like a ship in a storm, and the wind howled through the forest so that the towering trees bent and creaked. Amidst it all, there was a rumbling and rattling like the clanking of chains. But as the first pale light of day dawned, he saw where the storm was coming from.

A monstrous giant lay on his back on the ground, snoring. Thor stood on tiptoe: far away from him, the shaggy skull stared out from between the trees, and on the other side, far below, the shaggy knees jutted upward.

Angrily, Thor raised the hammer to strike. Then the monster stretched, and it was as if a mountain were rolling through the forest. The giant opened his maw, yawned, and rubbed his bulging eyes.

"Where is the mitten?" he growled, so that it sounded like branches snapping

, glared around beneath the trees, and groped with his paw toward the Aesir's sleeping quarters.

Then the gods leaped swiftly from the maw, and the giant stared down at them in bewilderment.

"What little men are jumping out of my mitten?" he bellowed. "Who are you little ones down there in the moss?"

"We are strangers," Loki cried quickly, "we want to go to the Jotuns beyond the world!"

"You're in the right place," snorted the giant, "you'll find them right behind the forest in the glacier mountains." And he grinned.

"Come along, if you can keep up! Just put your provisions right into my backpack, or you'll be left behind right from the start."

The giant strode powerfully through the forest; the dry branches cracked underfoot, and the Ases below ran after him as fast as they could.

"When will it be day?" Loki asked as they ran, for the air above them remained gloomy and gray, and yet there was no cloud or fog to be seen above the treetops.

"There is no day here!" grumbled the giant. "You are far away from the sky, the sun, and the moon. Here there is only twilight and night."

It had grown dark again, so the giant threw himself down beneath an oak tree; as he did so, a roar echoed through the forest.

"I want to sleep!" he bellowed. "Go get your own breakfast from my backpack!"

And already he was snoring.

Beside his head lay the sack, bulging high like a hill. Thor had grown hungry; he hurriedly climbed up and bent over the bundle to untie the straps. But no matter how hard he pulled and tugged—the knot held fast.

Wingthor grew furious. "Is the fiend mocking us?" He raised his hammer and smashed it down on the giant's head.

Then the forest man slowly ran his paw across his forehead in his sleep. "The leaves are falling," he murmured, "they are heavy with dew."

And already he was snoring again.

Once more Wingthor swung the hammer, and it felt as though he were striking deep into the forehead.

Then the giant rolled onto his side and grumbled: “The acorns are falling from the branches.”

Thor sat down on the giant’s nape and caught his breath. Then he raised the hammer a third time and threw it: he saw it sink into the temple up to the handle.

The giant flinched, jumped to his feet, and looked up the trunk. “The birds are defecating,” he bellowed. “It’s getting dark. Come on, you little ones! Do you see the glacier glinting behind the trees? That’s where the Lord of the Jötnar dwells with his companions. But beware, little men, and keep your tongues in check over there, or else you may come to a bad end!"...

Silently the gods strode out of the forest and climbed through the desolate pass. No bird flew through the air, no animal leaped over the stones. Towering mightily from the glacier before them was the castle, built of massive boulders.

Thor threw his head back and gazed upward: but in the twilight above, the gables faded from his sight. The castle seemed to tower close above them, and yet, no matter how they climbed, it remained just as distant.

At midnight they finally stood before the gate. But the iron bar gleamed so high above them that they reached for it in vain. So they pushed their way silently through the bars.

All was silent: no guard in the courtyard called out to them, no dog barked. But as they crept toward the hall, a roar like the roar of a storm burst out from the open door to meet them.

There, the Jotuns feasted and drank in a dense throng. Their ice-gray skulls undulated up and down like the crests of waves in the sea, and their roaring and hooting echoed off the ceiling. But at the very back, rising like a peak above a glacier, stood a snow-white crown: there, in the high seat, sat the ruler of the Jotuns, the Ice-Old One himself.

It seemed like a dream to Wingthor: he imagined himself to be the Lightning-Wielder in Asgard, and here he stood like a dwarf on the threshold.

"Hear me, you Jötnar!" he cried with all his might into the din:
"Thor from Asenheim has come to see your halls!"

Silence fell in the hall, and the Ice-Old One at the back of the high seat rolled his eyes until he beheld the gods on the threshold. Grinning, he slowly bared his grim teeth.

"Is that Thor, the slayer of the Thurses, down there?" he bellowed,
"I thought the god would be bigger!"

Then the hall boomed with the laughter of the Thurses all around the tables.

"If you gods wish to feast and drink in Jotunheim, first show us whether you are worthy of a seat at the table in the hall!"

Quickly, Thjalfi stepped forward and planted his hand on his hip.

"I leap before Thor through the clouds faster than Odin's gray steed storms across the sky!"

Behind the Ice-Old One stood Hugi, his cupbearer, tall and slender, with a pale face. The old man turned his eyes toward him.

"With mugs and bowls, you're always running from table to table in the hall. The Thurses call you a good-for-nothing. Now show us, Hugi, if you've learned anything!"

Thjalfi and Hugi leaped onto the threshold and ran in a wide circle through the courtyard, close to the fence.

As fast as a deer before a hunter, Thjalfi shot off, but Hugi raced ahead of him like a cloud in a storm, and in no time he was breathing down his neck again.

Hugi had flown through the ring in the courtyard three times when Thjalfi gasped for breath at the exit for the first time.

The hall echoed with the laughter of the Thurses around the tables. "As fast as an Aesir, that's how fast the snails crawl around here when it rains!"

Then Loki stepped forward with his flaming hair and planted his hand on his hip. "No feast in the halls of the Aesir

that Loki could not devour it as quickly as the hot storm from the south sweeps the water away from the beds of the streams:

> Come, to test the strength of your jaws, who feasts
> more vigorously, who devours more bravely!"

Logi, the kitchen boy, sat in the ashes by the hearth, his teeth gleaming, his eyes sparkling from his flushed face.

“Come on, Logi,” bellowed the old man in the raised seat, “show the strength of your teeth!”

They placed two enormous troughs, filled to the brim with meat, in front of the warriors, and Loki and Logi greedily pounced on them like two whirlwinds. In an instant, Loki had devoured the meat in his trough, bones and all. But by then Logi had already polished off his trough as well.

And once again the hall thundered with the laughter of the Thur-men all around the tables.

“The morsel was too hard for the Aesir’s delicate teeth!”

Then Wingthor himself stepped forward with a powerful stride before the Jotuns and cried out: “Far and wide have I wandered through the world and sat at feasts with gods and giants—yet Thor still took the deepest draught in all the universe!”

“Bring me my drinking horn!” grinned the old man, and Hugi the Tall came running with the horn in his arms.

It wasn’t all that big for the Jötunn: just man-high, so that Thor could barely reach the rim with his mouth.

With thirsty eyes, he gazed into the foaming mass of beer, stood on tiptoe, and drank until he was out of breath.

But when he looked into the vessel, the horn was as full as before. Angrily, Thor put his mouth to it again and gulped and swallowed mightily. Then the flood in the vessel fell by a nail’s breadth
— and no more.

For the third time, Thor put his mouth to it: he strained his chest and drank until the veins on his forehead swelled to bursting and

his face turned dark red. Then the liquid in the horn dropped by a finger's width.

Furious, Thor stepped back.

"Assign me another task," he growled, "I will drink no more!"

Across the floor of the hall, the old man's cat crept purring between the tables: barely as tall as a man, not too large for a Jotun beast.

"Look here, my little cat!" grumbled the old man. "Our boys are playing with her and testing their strength on her. You try, too, to lift my little cat off the floor."

With a frown, Thor leaped toward the cat, grabbed it by the belly, and intended to hurl it up to the ceiling with a single jerk. The cat arched its back plaintively and lifted one of its front paws off the floor. But no matter how hard Thor strained, the other paws remained firmly planted on the floor.

Then Thor let go of the cat and leaped into the middle of the hall. His hair blazed, and his fiery beard crackled and sputtered with sparks.

"Come at me, all you Ionians!" he roared. "Man by man to wrestle with Thor!"

The Niesen stared down silently from the benches, but the ruler snorted from his high seat:

"We giants are far too big for such a runt! First wrestle with Elli, the old woman—she is my nurse. Elli," bellowed the lot, "come here!"

Then heavy footsteps shuffled slowly through the passage behind the hall wall, the side door creaked open, and an icy breath blew into the hall: standing in the doorway, deeply stooped, was an old woman—strands of snow-white hair hung down over her face, and from dull eyes she stared across at Thor, but suddenly she stretched out her gaunt arms with lightning speed and threw herself at him. It felt to the god as if a mountain were rolling over him: for a long time he braced himself and struggled—but finally he fell to one knee.

Then a crash rang through the hall as if the rafters were collapsing above them; all the giants leapt from their benches, and the ancient one in the high seat roared:

"Now you have been to Jotunheim, Thor, beyond the world! Now you have tested our strength!" ..

The day dawned gloomily, and the ruler, the Old One himself, escorted the guests to the courtyard gate. There he paused and spoke:

"Now you shall hear, O gods, what was truth and what was deceit! The Jötunn has beguiled you with illusions! Look into my eyes—do you no longer recognize the forest man from the woods?

The straps of the backpack, Thor, you could not untie them, of course, for I bound them with the primal cold of icy power.

Three times the hammer flew at my head: then I thrust the mountains before my skull as a shield. Do you see the deep valleys gaping there in the rock? Mjölnir carved them in for our eternal remembrance.

I sat here in the high seat for a long time before you entered Jötunheim. Thjalfi runs fast, but he cannot fly as swiftly as Hugi, my servant, the Jötun's thought!

Faster than Loki, Logi, the wildfire, devours whatever it seizes! From my drinking horn, Thor, you took three mighty draughts—then the flood sank back into the sea, and three times the tide went out: for the tip of the horn emptied into the World Sea.

You lifted my cat and raised one of its paws off the ground! Then all who watched with watchful eyes in the hall shuddered: you swung the Midgard Serpent out of the sea, and it clung trembling to the bottom of the lake with only its finned tail.

You wrestled with Elli, the aged nurse of the Jotuns: that was the age from which none can escape, not even the gods, when Jdun's apples one day fall withered from the withering trunk.

We had heard much, Thor, of the deeds of the gods, but had I known how great your power is, you would never have found your way to us in the glacier mountains. For the last time have you

seen the ice giant's hall! Remain mighty up there in the heavens beneath the light of the sun—here in the eternal ice and darkness, only we reign!"

Thor raised his hammer to strike—and the ice giant was gone, and so was the castle! And Thor stood alone in the desolation of the glacier mountains with his companions."

Skeggi looked down at the table before him, then reached for the tankard and took a hearty swig. The fire in the hall had gone out; only the coals still glowed in the darkness. Swart, the old man, stood up and threw a massive log into the embers, so that it began to crackle and the flames flared up again.

Chieftain Hakon's eyes were serious.

"Thanks and honor be to Thor, the protector of mankind and the earth. And what I am about to say, Skeggi, I do not say to diminish the glory of your god. Yet it is the spirit that guides the fist, so that it strikes with the sword in the right place. And Odin had to risk no less to attain his wisdom than Thor did to slay the giants.

Odin has but one eye. Do you know, Erik, how that came to be? Listen well to how dearly Odin, All-Father, bought his wisdom.

You have heard of the sacred pool that glistens at the foot of the World Tree, where the giant Norns sit silently on the shore and spin, shaded by the dense branches of the ash tree.

There, at the bottom of the lake, deep down in the moss, crouches the water spirit Mimir. Mimir is ancient, as old as the world. His silver hair hangs thick and tangled around his face full of wrinkles; his silver beard has grown down to his feet and envelops him completely. But Mimir listens with keen ears. Deep beneath him in the earth, he hears it crack and crunch: Gierzahn, the dragon, gnawing at the roots of the ash tree. From the treetops in the blue, the sun eagle screeches its song. And from the shore of the pond, the spindles of fate of the

/

. But at midnight, in the quietest hour, when one day turns into the next, the daughters of Fate lay down their spindles and whisper to one another about what was, what is, and what will be.

There the water spirit listens secretly from the depths, and he overhears many things that no one else in the world knows.

So it was one evening by the pond, twilight sinking from the green thicket of branches, the surface of the lake glistening, still and smooth. Then footsteps rang out in the silence, and a tall man stepped up to the water, clad in a blue coat, a dark felt hat pulled low over his brow. The Fates bowed their heads lower toward the loom, but continued spinning in silence. In a loud voice, the man called across the water:

"Secret listener at the heart of the earth,
Mimir, emerge from the flood:
Share your wisdom with me, spirit of the waters,
The ruler of the world calls to you!"

Then there was a rushing sound from the depths, the flood parted, and Mimir's head, with its silver hair, emerged. His eyes glinted greenish in the twilight; his voice murmured dully from the water, like the gurgling of the waves on the shore:

"Is it you, Odin? I know many things, and I can tell of many things. But Mimir gives nothing for free. The water is cold, and the depths are dark. Your Allgen, Odin, shine like the sun in the sky. If you give me one to light and warm my depths, I will show you what I have overheard about the fate of the world."

Then Odin promised him this. He bent down to Mimir's head in the lake, and for a long time the god murmured with the water spirit.

It grew dark, night came and went, and only when the dawn glowed in the sky did Mimir's head sink beneath the water, and Odin set off for home. Then he had but one eye left.

Odin became the richest in runic wisdom, In compelling magical power:

"From the depths, the god's eye
sparkles at us from the bottom."

"And what did the water spirit say to Odin, Grandfather?"
"No one in the world knows that, Erik:

No ear on the face of the earth heard what the
rulers whispered in secret!

And Odin strode on restlessly, to increase his wisdom. Wafthrudnir, the mad giant, was a mighty giant at the end of the world, where the path descends to Helheim: he knew more of secret things than anyone else in the universe.

A red glow of flame fell into the night from Wafthrudnir's vast hall as Odin approached it, and from the underworld he heard Garm, the hound of the dead, howling and barking.

Wafthrudnir's eyes flashed wildly from his pale face as he saw the guest in the storm-hat enter: the man stood silent in the doorway.

"Who are you, stranger?" he roared, "what do you want in Wafthrudnir's hall?"

"My name is Natgut. I have come, wise giant, to measure my knowledge against yours."

The giant curled his thick lips in a sneer.

"Then take a seat at the beer bench. Soon, I think, it will become clear which of us is wiser. But whoever loses will not carry his head home on his shoulders."

"Ask from the high seat," said the wanderer, "I'll give you my answer from the door."

Then Wafthrudnir asked him about the sun and the moon, about night and day and their rulers, where winter and summer come from, and where the wind comes into the world. He asked him about the races on earth and in heaven: who created mankind, and how Bifröst, the bridge to the heavens, was built. And the Wanderer knew everything. Then the Niese marveled and shook his head in amazement.

"Sit on the bench, Wise One," he growled, "and now you ask!"

The Wanderer sat down before the giant. To test him, he first asked about primeval times. How Dmir came to be in the abyss and the world from Nnür's body. How Audumla, the Heavenly Cow, arose above the glacier, and how the world was ordered by the gods. And when he saw that nothing had remained hidden from Wafthrudnir, he asked him about many things that had only recently been revealed to him by the Dümmer of the Ancestors. When the last day would dawn, how the battle between gods and fiends would unfold and where, who would charge against Thor, who would slay Odin All-Father, and who would avenge him. Then it became clear that the Niese knew everything as it was to be, until the end of all things.

Then Ratgut rose and asked him one more thing, which pointed beyond the end of all things: "Odin's dearest son will one day lie on the bier, to be carried down to Hel in the dragon ship. Then Odin will ascend to him once more and bend down over him. What will the father whisper into the dead son's ear as a farewell, for eternal comfort?"

In his high seat, the giant recoiled, and his shaggy hair bristled on his skull.

"Only one can ask, only one can know! You are Odin, All-Father! To Odin I lost my head!"

"Was that why the giant had to die, Uncle?"

"Odin struck off his head. Thus one of the worst enemies of the gods had fallen."

"And what is it, Ohm, that Odin will say into the dead son's ear? Has no one yet learned this?"

"No one knows, Erik. But our bards and seers have pondered long and hard what it might be.

When, in the final battle, the fiends fight the gods, heaven and earth will go up in flames. It is called Ragnarök, the fall of the rulers, the end of days. And then, so the giants believe, nothing will remain as it was in the beginning—only the empty abyss in eternal gray.

But Odin is confident that things will turn out differently than they imagine. And the seers believe that he must have whispered this into his son's ear on the journey to the underworld, as an eternal comfort.

But they can only guess, they can only surmise. For the wisdom and will of the god are inscrutable to us.

Thus I once heard in the Oberland a dark song of Odin that I cannot get out of my head; its meaning lay beyond human understanding. Yet this much I recognized: it is Odin who sings that he once sacrificed himself to find the most secret nuns of fate, and that he redeems himself, just as gold is purified in the consuming fire.

> On the wind tree I hung for nine sorrowful
> nights, pierced by Gungnir, the spear of the
> God of War:
> Odin, wounded by Allfather's weapon, I
> consecrated myself to myself!
>
> I took no food, nor did I quench my thirst! My gaze
> wandered downward:
> Then the runes rose up from the depths, Then
> the bonds on the tree snapped."

"Does Odin tell no one, O Grandfather, of what he knows?"

"Yes, Erik. As much as is good for them, he tells the gods of it and his favorites among men, the heroes and singers, so that they may fight bravely at his side against the Unholy. For Odin knows that all who are of right mind must stand together to ward off the collapse of the world, gods and men alike.

But woe to those whom Odin loves, if their heroic spirit turns to malice and treachery. The god punishes them terribly, Erik, so that he lets no envious ones grow to be companions of the evil ones.

Geirröd was the name of a king in the Gothic realm, sharing the same name as the giant whom Thor slew. Odin had made him mighty. Then Hugin brought him back dire rumors about the

prince, and Munin cawed that King Geirröd had become wicked and evil: he spared his guests meager fare, and he beat the destitute and cast them over the threshold.

So the god wrapped himself deeply in his cloak and wandered to Geirröd's home, disguised as an old beggar. Vicious dogs barked around Geirröd's homestead, but when the tall old man staggered through the gate, they came running in droves, wagging their tails, and licked the stranger's hands, whimpering.

Then Geirröd shouted from inside the hall.

"Who are you, one-eyed vagabond? You're up to no good, making my dogs fawn over you!"

And he had him seated between two fires to roast him to death. But though the flames licked at the old man's shoulders and head, they did not singe a single hair on his head nor a single corner of his cloak.

For three nights and three days the old man sat in the embers, gazing silently around the hall with flashing eyes. Agnar came running to him, the king's son, still a child, holding a cup full of wine in his hands.

"Drink, old man, lest you thirst in the fire!"

Then the old man emptied the cup and cried out from the fire with a booming voice:

> For three full days I sat in the fire, No
> one refreshed the guest:
> You alone, Agnar! You alone shall rule The
> Gothic realm, son of Geirröd!
>
> Listen, Agnar, to the old man's song Of
> wonders in the universe:
> No one in the world offers you such a precious
> reward as refreshment for a single drink of wine!"

And he sang to the king's son of how the ash tree grew toward the heavens from the depths of the earth. From beneath the crown of Yggdrasil, he sang to him of the bright abodes of the gods. Of the

Heroes in Valhalla's hall, and how they will march out with the gods to the final battle.

Geirröd sat gloomily before the drinking horn, listening with a heavy head and eyes ablaze with intoxication.

"May Odin's favor be upon him and the grace

of all the Aesir," sang the old man:

"He who reaches through the flames
And snatches the cauldron from above my head,
Which veils the heavens from me!"

Agnar leapt forward and snatched the cauldron from the hearth, lifting it above the old man's head. Through the open flue, the sky flashed in, star by star.

Then the old man leaped from the embers, waved upward, and suddenly the fire in the hall went out: night fell in the hall. But through the darkness, the stranger's single eye blazed with a terrible glow.

Then Geirröd recognized him. He leaped from the high seat and stumbled hastily down the steps. The sword that Odin had once given him slid from its sheath, and the steel stared up at him from the floor, its tip flashing blue. Shuddering, Geirröd fell, and the blade pierced him. Thus he rode to Hel..."

"That was Odin-Agg, the Lord of Terror!" whispered Swart:
"No human eye can bear his gaze. When Odin-Agg reveals his face to his enemies, sudden terror seizes the army, and even the bravest—who have never trembled before death—flee like a herd of goats tumbling over the rocks when a wolf leaps before them!"

"But Odin would bring the gods and men a gift that warms their hearts even more powerfully than the sun's rays warm their bodies: Odrörir, the drink of the gods, the sacred mead from the heart's blood of the Vanir! Whoever tastes it will have whatever he wishes to proclaim turned into song.

From dark depths, Odin would bring it to Asenheim.

There was a Vanir, the divine Nauner; the gods had created him after their reconciliation as the emblem of their covenant, and he had become the wisest of all beings in the universe. The cunning dwarves peered at him enviously from their caves. Filled with greed for his wisdom, they lured him into the chasm. They threw themselves upon him in a wild throng and thrust steel through his chest, so that his heart's blood spurted forth in a hot stream. Busily they caught the waves in precious vessels of clear crystal and mixed them with fragrant honey into foaming mead. As they tasted it, a sacred fervor coursed through their veins. Before their eyes, the hidden veins of ore and gold in the rock became clear, and sudden creative power coursed through their limbs: the forges echoed with hammer blows, the bellows hissed from dawn until late into the night, and immeasurable treasures piled up in their caves. Odrörir, the Spirit-Stirrer, they called the drink. But they sent word to Asenheim that the divine Rauner had choked to death among them on the overflow of his own wisdom.

Suttung was the name of a giant, the intoxication-hungry one. With treacherous eyes, he stared down from Thursenheim into the realm of the dwarves. Odrörir glowed crimson from the dark depths; busy as bees, he watched the little folk swarm around the crystal vessel and sip from it, and those who had previously gazed with pale faces now swung their massive hammers with flushed cheeks.

Then, by night, Suttung broke into the realm of the gorges and stole the potion. He hid it in a cave in the Thursen Mountains, deep within the rock.

Odin sat on Hlidskjalf, his high seat, and gazed across at the mountains in the evening sunshine. In a blue glow, the stone wall shone from afar as if made of glass. Suddenly, he saw a blood-red glow burst forth from the very heart of the mountains, and within the glow, shaggy giant skulls crowded around the crystal vessel filled with the luminous liquid. They drank greedily, then staggered drunkenly through the cave. Driven to senseless rage

from the potion: they roared and fell upon one another in a tangle, fists flying.

Hugin screeched shrill in the astonished husband's ear, and Munin fluttered hastily around his head.

Then the god grew furious and strode out of Valhalla's gates, his dark storm-hat pulled low over his brow...

On the edge of the Giant Mountains lived Suttung's brother, Baugi, the Hunchback.

A hundred years old, his face draped in hair.
His countenance bent to the ground with age.

Nine of Baugi's servants were mowing the mountain meadow up above in the early morning; but the giants' clumsy scythes cut poorly. Then a wanderer approached them, his weather-beaten cap pulled low over his brow.

"Your scythes are dull!" he said, and tossed a whetstone among them.

"Whoever sharpens his blade on this once will never need to sharpen it again!"

Hastily, they all rushed to the whetstone, and each wanted it for himself. In a wild scuffle, they fought over it on the ground. They leaped to their feet, seized their scythes, and charged at one another. And they did not stop until they had all slaughtered one another.

The stranger descended to Baugi's hall.

From the fire inside, the old man called out hoarsely: "Who goes there?"

"My name is Bölmerk, the villain," said the wanderer; "I bring you bad news. Your nine servants have slain one another on the mountain meadow with their scythes."

Wailing, the giant old man clasped his hands together.

"Who will help me now, an old man!"

"I will help you," said Bölwerk, "and I ask for little in return for my services. Show me the way to Suttung, the giant, and I shall be satisfied."

“Thursenheim’s wall, the mountain, looms up into the clouds!” murmured the old man, “Thursenheim is sealed off by rock, all the way to the heavens, to everything that breathes! No little hare hops, no stag runs across the ridge, no eagle soars over the ice-gray peaks!”

“Then lead me along the path you yourself travel through the rock!” cried Bölwerk.

In amazement, Baugi lifted his white head from his shoulders, and with a suspicious look in his cloudy eyes, he stared at the guest.

“You know a great deal, Bölwerk, if you know how I return home to Suttung! But I will show you the way if you have served me faithfully.”

So Bölwerk served the giant for a year. Afterward, they climbed together to the rock face that towered steeply above the mountain meadow. Baugi had brought a drill, Nati, the rattler. As he set it against the rock, it swelled before Bölwerk’s eyes into a monstrous spiral, like a fir tree, when the mist billows over it, suddenly shooting up in the cleft beyond its usual height.

With a grinding sound, it spun of its own accord into the crevice, so that the stone fragments whirled far into the valleys, and the mountains roared and crashed.

“Go on, Bölmerk!” Baugi shouted, pulling the drill out.

But Bölwerk bent down and peered into the chasm; it was pitch-black inside. He blew into it, and dust flew into his face.

Grumbling, Baugi let the drill rattle once more, and once more Bölwerk bent down and peered into the hole—a glimmer of light flashed from the distance, and when he blew into it, the dust scattered into the distance.

In an instant, Bölwerk turned into a snake and shot into the chasm. Treacherously, Baugi thrust the drill after him, but already the tip of his tail was slithering away into the distance, and behind him the rock quickly closed up again...

Deep in the Thursen Mountains, the glacier grotto glowed with

walls of blue ice, and mighty icicles glistened all around, hanging down from the ceiling. Through the icy glow, the heart's blood of the Manen shone blood-red from a stone niche in a crystal vessel. A gentle breath passed through the grotto: on a moss-covered bed, with yellow lichens in her lap, sat Gunlöd, Sut-tung's daughter, guarding the sacred drink. Days and nights flowed by in lonely, cold silence, and her breast rose with a sigh in longing for life and light.

Then the grotto resounded with footsteps, rumbling ever closer through the cave passage in the archway. The ice door burst open. Startled, Gunlöd leapt from her bed.

Tall, slender, and dark, a man stood in the shadow of the entrance. His single eye blazed imperiously beneath his storm cap.

"Gunlöd, a hasty guest has come to relieve you of your watch. Hand me the cup filled with the sacred mead as a greeting!"

Then it seemed to Gunlöd as if the sun were shining from the sky into her dark cave. Her own will melted away. With her head bowed, she offered the cup to the guest, glowing with humility.

Then he wrapped his arms around her and sat with her all night long on the mossy bed.

But as dawn broke in the valleys below, the guest grasped the crystal with the meteor so that it rang out; an eagle soared out toward the cave, the precious vessel clasped firmly in its talons, and, filled with divine ecstasy, it plunged over the mountain ridge—straight toward Asenheim.

The giants roared and raged furiously when they came for their morning drink and found Gunlöd alone and distraught in the cave. A black vulture soared through the air after Suttung, the abductor. But there, already, stood the gods before the gates of Asenheim. They drew their spears, and Thor hurled his hammer: the giant vulture crashed dead from the sky to the ground.

Then it came to pass, as the song says:

Gunlöd, daughter of Thuri, mourns,
Abandoned by Odin, in the ice-hall:
The mead glistens on the gods' table, The flood of
life in sparkling light."

Chieftain Hakon took the cup and drank.

"And yet," he said more softly, "despite all of Thor's bravery and all of Odin's mighty deeds—Ragnarök approaches, when fate commands it and the gods perish!"

"Why must Odin die too, Uncle, just like mortals?"

"Because he, too, has sinned, Erik, against the law that binds us all. Because the gods, too, have fallen into guilt and sacrilege. It was already wrong that they took Loki, the liar, into their midst in the Hall of Heaven. But what came after was even worse.

Valhalla was burned to the ground in the War of the Vanir. The gods pondered long on how they should rebuild the hall, and it seemed to them a heavy task. Then Loki spoke:

"I know a master builder high up among the Thurses who has built glittering castles in a single night. I will hire him for you. Just let me negotiate the wages with him on your behalf."

And once again, the gods trusted the wrong one.

Then Loki secretly promised the ice giant: he would give him Freyja as his wife, and he would have the sun and the stars in the sky if he built the castle within the winter.

The giant came rumbling from the north: he sat in the sleigh like a monstrous shaggy bear, and icicles clinked down from his beard to his belt. His black horse, as black as the night, pulled the vehicle, snorting: where he neighed, birds fell dead from the trees, and he dragged a mighty load: building stones, gleaming like blocks of ice in a bluish glow. Hastily the Thurse piled them up, restlessly the black horse from the north panted, so that a cold wind like a winter storm

roared through the halls of the gods. The walls rose mightily, and already the gables gleamed as the first balmy breezes blew in from the south.

Then the master builder stepped before the Aesir and roared:

"Tomorrow Valhalla will be complete; tomorrow I demand my reward from you: Freyja along with all the stars in the sky, which Loki promised me with a sacred oath on your behalf, O gods!"

Grinning and snorting, he hurried away to work.

The goddesses screamed and crowded around Freyja, weeping. The gods were greatly alarmed and looked at Loki. But he remained silent and gazed treacherously at the ground.

Thor grabbed him by his flaming hair and raised his hammer above him.

Then Loki, the deceiver, smiled.

"I hired the giant—he hasn't quite kept his promise yet: Freyja is to remain in Asenheim, and the stars in the sky! Just let me do this!"

The dawn glowed over the gables; the giant builder stood darkly before the castle, and the black horse panted as it approached with the glittering load on the sleigh. But across the ravine, behind the castle, all the gods were already waiting at daybreak, watching with concern as the giant's work grew. Only Loki was missing.

Then a mare emerged from the nearby forest with a soft whinny.

> Her mane fluttered in the wind; her coat
> shimmered silver like silk.

As the black stallion caught sight of the gleaming mare, he reared high on the sled, neighed brightly at his companion, and rushed after her. The building stones flew from the sled, the reins snapped, and one after another the steeds stormed far away over the heights.

In terror and fury, the giant roared.

"You have betrayed me, liars! I want my reward, Loki!"

In blind rage, he ran through the chasm toward the gods. Thor raised his hammer, and the giant crashed down, shattered.

Freyja was freed, the sun, moon, and stars were redeemed: the universe was saved! And Valhalla shone with golden gables in the blue!

But the oaths Loki had sworn to the gods with deceit were broken, and all the heavenly beings were entangled in his wickedness!

Loki had thus become hated by the gods, and he became a laughingstock among men.

Loki, the mare, was what they called him everywhere; for he had been forced to become a mare so that he might deceive the giant for his reward.

Grumbling, he crept away from Asgard by night and sought out the harbinger of doom in the dark cleft, Angrboda, the giantess. There he sired with her the terror of the world, the dreadful triplets, Erik, of whom I have told you.

The night groaned and the storms roared as Loki's hideous brood came into the light: Fenrir, the wolf, the gleaming Midgard Serpent, and Hel with hollow eyes, the pale one.

From Vigrid, the battlefield, the gods looked down in horror. Already Thor swung his hammer to destroy the brood. But at the same moment Odin raised his spear. He knew well: the brood would bring ruin upon him and the gods—but Loki was the Aesir's blood brother, and clan loyalty demanded that they spare his children, even if it meant their own downfall.

Odin rode Sleipnir down to Thursenheiin. He seized the serpent and hurled it far across the lands into the World Sea. He banished Hel to the realm of the dead, and Fenrir, the devourer, they bound before the gates of heaven with cunning...

Ever since, Loki has been creeping secretly across the earth in the darkness, Erik. Where greed rumbles, where hatred foams, where envy murmurs, there his fiery hair blazes, there his whisper hisses and flickers against the gods...

Evil omens came to the Aesir. Like an autumn breeze, it swept through the leaves of the World Ash.

Thjazi, the storm giant, had once seized Loki as he rode through the skies above Thursenheim. Loki sat captive, as he had once been with Geirröd, and he was not released until he promised Thjazi to bring Jdun, the mistress of the golden apples, to Thursenheim.

In the shade of her tree, Jdun lay in the grass and slept. Then Loki rushed up in Freyja's falcon garb: he transformed Jdun into a nut, seized the nut with his beak, and soared away with her to Thursenheim.

Then the sacred tree withered away, and the golden apples fell withered from the branches to the ground. In vain did Bragi, the singer, search for his wife; in vain did all the Aesir search with him. Finally, Heimdall, the watchman of the heavens, spotted her in the Thursen Mountains. Then the gods compelled Loki to bring her back to Asgard by trickery.

But the gods had grown older since they had stopped eating Idun's apples, and gray strands now glimmered in the hair of many.

Then the fiends sensed that the bonds of discipline and order were loosening. Giants gathered everywhere, the armies of the dead roared in revolt beneath the earth, and the serpent writhed at the bottom of the World Sea, clasping the earth with its body so that it trembled. But before the gates of heaven, Fenrir grew and stretched his limbs, grinding against his bonds.

Thus our time has come, Erik. And it has become a terrible time. From the beginning, the enemies of the gods have been fiends and giants. But now, among men too, enemies of the gods are rising, who heed neither law nor loyalty, and rage like monsters against the heavenly rule. A time of strife, Erik, a time of discord clangs across the earth."

"And what will happen then, Ohm?"

"Then the End will come, Erik. When it will come,

no one can say. But it will come, and how it will come, of that the seers and singers have foretold, whom Odin allowed to gaze into the future.

The world resounds with strife and hatred. But Balder, the Light One, the Peacemaker of the World, still lives. And as long as he lives, justice cannot perish, and the world endures despite all the wickedness.

One morning, Balder awakens from his sleep in distress, and Nanna, his wife, is startled when she sees him: so pale is his brave face!

He has had a heavy dream: blood dripped from the walls of Balderheim, and Asenheim rang with cries of woe!

All the gods and goddesses rush to the thing under the ash tree, and sorrowfully they ponder what it means that Balder has dreamed so fearfully.

But Odin leaps onto Sleipnir's back, spear in hand, and rides down the path of death to Hel. The ground rumbles, the chasms howl, the corpse-hound Garm barks furiously and rages at the rattling chain as the father of the gods bursts through the gate of the underworld.

Odin halts before the burial mound of the Wala. With a song of magical power, he compels the seeress of the giants to rise from the tomb, the one famed far and wide, who has long since been decaying there.

Then the dead woman rises above the mound in a pale, deathly twilight. Her aged hair hangs heavily around her pale face.

"Who calls so mightily down into the depths? Who disturbs me in my death-sleep?"

"I am Wegtam, son of Waltam!" cries Odin. "The windows shine in Helheim's hall: for whom are the tables set for a feast, for whom are the walls adorned?"

Then a voice echoes from the hill, trembling with fear:

> "Alif Balder awaits the gleaming goblet, The shield
> covers the foaming drink:

The sons of the Aesir in fear and misery!
You forced me to speak—now let me rest."

But Odin raises his spear imperiously, and he will not let the dead woman return to sleep in her tomb until he has learned everything that is to come.

Silently he returns to the hall of Asgard: he calls for Widar, the Avenger, and speaks with him in secret for a long time.

Anxiety grips Balder's mother, the queen of the heavens. With her hair flying, Frigg rushes through the cosmos and implores all that breathes and grows, all that the earth bears and all that lies hidden beneath the earth, not to harm Balder, the Light One: the Thurses in the chasms, the dwarves in the caves, the animals in the forest, the fish in the water, the rustling trees, the raging floods, the devouring flames, the ore in the moor, the unyielding stone. And all swear to the anxious mother with sacred oaths to spare Balder, the Ruler of Justice, the Reconciler of the World; for even among the Thurses and fiends, none is his enemy.

Frigg breathes a deep sigh of relief, and with shining eyes she returns to heaven.

But she has forgotten one, the mistletoe sprout.

The rod seemed far too small, frail and
thin as a maiden.

Then Loki creeps up, snatches the sapling, and in his fist it suddenly shoots up into a spear with a murderous tip...

All the gods cheer as Frigg returns home with glad tidings: only Odin looks down silently from his high seat.

Balder stands smiling in the hall, and the gods test whether their weapons will keep the oath that metal and stone and all things swore. Shouting with joy, they swing their swords and hurl their spears. The swords whiz past Balder's head, and the whistling spears glide past him.

Only Höd, the blind one, stands silently in the corner. Then Loki

secretly approaches him and presses the mistletoe spear into his fist.

"You too, throw in Balder's honor!" he hisses to him, "I'll guide the weapon for you!"

Behind the assembly of gods stands Höd, taking aim with his blind eye. Loki guides his hand. The spear whizzes in a wide arc over the heads of the cheering crowd and crashes into Balder's chest.

The god lies on the ground, covered in blood.

A scream of terror pierces the air. Nanna collapses dead over him.

The sun loses its light. The gods run and cry out through the darkness. Loki drags the blind Höd out into the night. Only Odin watches silently from his high seat.

Down below, the people gather in confusion from the earth; the dwarves peek timidly out of their caves; the giants stare in dismay from the valleys and up from the glaciers toward the dark sky.

Balder has fallen, and the Light One will never return. The gods prepare their favorite's ship for the final voyage. In the gloomy twilight on the seashore, it rises from the roaring surf; above the bow, the pyre looms high. There, enthroned in a golden chair, sits the dead god, spear in his arm, Nanna at his breast.

Then the winds roar and the earth rumbles. From high and low, from near and far, all creatures are drawn to see Balder for the last time: the dwarves scurry, the humans run, the Nieses stamp their way here. The shy game emerges from the forest; the fish, teeming, stretch their heads toward the flood. All that has wings circles noisily above the ship.

From the gray clouds glows Bisröst, the fire-sparkling bridge; Asgard's gate shines aloft, and the gods descend from heaven. Odin leads the way on Sleipnir, in his golden helmet, Gungnir, the spear in his right hand; Wingthor in the goat-drawn chariot with his hammer; Freyer with the radiant ring upon

the golden boar; Freyja, Brisingamen over her breast, in a chariot drawn by hissing cats; Heimdall on Goldzopf, the Gjallarhorn at his side. Deeply shrouded in dark veils, Frigg follows them on foot, and behind her her helpers and maids and the hosts of heroes that Asgard harbors.

The murmur of the crowd on the seashore swells dully. The gods stand silent in the gleam of their weapons: there Odin ascends to the dragon ship. He slips the World Ring from his arm, places it upon his dead son's chest, and whispers his farewell—the last wisdom of eternal hope, as he knows it—into his ear.

Thor's thunderhammer crashes into the ship. Flames shoot up, and once more the dead god shines forth from the blaze with Nanna. Then black clouds of smoke swirl over the dragon, and the vessel drifts out to sea—toward the west, where the gate of the underworld yawns...

In the distant glow, in the desolate hall of her dead son, Frigg wrings her hands.

"Is there no one in Asgard who dares to enter the Hall of the Dead? Who will ride down to beg Balder from death? Who will offer the greedy Hel all the treasures of heaven for him?"

Hermod leaps onto Odin's steed Sleipnir and drives it down into the dark abyss. The ground trembles; a howl rises from the chasms. The black streams of the underworld roar. With a thunderous roar, Hermod charges across the bridge on Sleipnir. There, before the gates of Helheim, a giantess with a pale face stares from beneath her helmet; she draws her spear.

"The bridge thunders: it is not ghosts who ride! Who gallops toward the realm of the dead while still alive? Turn back!"

Hermod spurs the horse, and in a mighty leap Sleipnir clears the fence. Hermod enters Hel's hall. The long fire smolders dimly in the vast hall. Through the bluish smoke he sees the dead gathering, around the tables and in the high seat Balder, his brother, with eyes fixed in a dreamlike stare, Nanna, the pale one, at his breast.

Hermod's cry echoes loudly through the silent hall: "Where is the princess in the house of the dead? I bring ransom for Balder and Nanna—Asenheim's shimmering treasures!"

Then a dull, hollow sound comes from the back of the hall:
"I do not want Asenheim's treasures for Balder. I will not trade the god for gold jewelry!

> When all beings in Weltenheim weep, When none withholds tears from the dead, Then I shall open the bronze gate to the Aesir, Then I shall let the Light One return to life!"

Then Frigg wanders through the lands with the jug in her hand, To gather tears for Balder, her dead son. And all weeps, what is in heaven and on earth: the darkest Thurs and the most treacherous dwarf in the chasm. Tears well up in the eyes of the animals in the forest, grass and leaves tremble with dew, and the hard rock in the mountains drips with drops.

Evening has fallen. Frigg has wandered throughout the whole world. Then, in a dark cave in the Thursen Gorge, she encounters a giant woman: Loki's companion, the harbinger Angrboda, her dark head encircled by snakes.

The giantess laughs harshly.

"My name is Ungrateful, the ice-cold Thursian. It is not for my sake that the gods live in the light. My dry eye has no tears for Balder: let Hel keep what she has!" ...

Frigg has wandered through the worlds in vain with her tear-filled jug: Balder remains beneath the earth...

At the funeral feast, the gods sit in Ægir's glass hall down at the bottom of the sea: they deliberate and whisper, they likely suspect who guided Höd, the blind one, in his fateful shot.

Then Loki steps among them with a defiant greeting. From a distant hiding place, he has eavesdropped on the land: there, the desire seized him to mock the gods in their wrath, and like a hissing flame he has descended through the waves to the depths.

The gods gaze silently at Loki, and none return his greeting. Only Odin bids Widar, the Silent One, to offer the mead cup to his blood brother. Thirsty, Loki drinks, and now he begins to revile the gods. He scolds Bragi, the singer, as a coward: brave in words alone while drinking beer on the bench.

He mocks Tyr for losing his right hand in the wolf's jaws.

He reviles Freyr for giving his sword to a servant to win Gerd's favor.

Laughing, he boasts before Skadi: he lit the fires in which her father burned.

He strikes his side and shows Heimdall the sword he stole from the guardian of the heavens.

He calls out to the weeping Sif, reminding her how she stood before Thor with a bald head, since he had robbed her of her hair.

He unjustly scolds Odin, the father of the gods.

And he mocks the mother of the gods, saying she ran in vain through the whole world like a beggar woman pleading for Balder's life.

Then the Glass Hall resounds, and Thor storms into the hall.

"I recognize Thor by his rage!" cries Loki; "You were quieter when you hid in the glove of Niesen!"

Furious, Wingthor raises his hammer.

Then Loki leaps from his seat.

"He strikes—therefore I must go! But before I go, you shall hear who truly slew Balder: The blind man hurled the mistletoe spear blindly—I guided the fist:

> I craved vengeance, and vengeance I obtained.
> The light faded from the skies:
> Balder, the Comforter, in death's bonds,
> The end of the Aesir's power!"

Loki leaps out the door with shrill laughter and blazes his way up through the flood with a hiss...

Now the gods go out into the world to seek Loki. Then Heimdall, from the gate of heaven, spots him far away in the

Thursen Mountains, in a rocky valley. He sits on the riverbank mending his net to catch fish.

Heimdall summons the gods and points out the villain to them. All together they rush through the air. But Loki is gone. They seize the net and lower it into the flood. On both banks, the gods pull it upstream. But Thor wades behind it, right through the swirling water, and peers ahead.

A mighty salmon leaps glistening from the river. Then Thor snatches it in midair, and in the god's fist wriggles Loki, the blasphemer...

The Aesir gather for the trial of the god-slayer. Skadi, the wild one, approaches, snorting with vengeance. She drags Loki's trembling sons along with her: as they catch sight of their father, their hair stands on end. Madness sprays from their eyes, wolfish shaggy hair shoots forth from them, their heads become wolf's jaws: in senseless rage they rush at one another and tear each other apart.

From the bloody entrails of her sons, Skadi twists the bonds for Loki. They become iron clamps as she binds Loki to sharp rocks in the crags. Skadi releases a viper, its bluish body swollen with venom, upon Loki's head in the cave: it spits its venom down into his face! In furious agony, Loki cries out and strains with all his limbs against the bonds, so that the earth trembles.

Then Sigyn, his wife, climbs steep paths to reach her faithless husband. She sits down before him on hard stone and holds a bowl protectively before his face with both hands: in it she catches the snake's corrosive venom. Thus she sits over him day and night, watching over him with deep concern.

And ever more wildly does the time of strife clang through the world. It becomes a time of terror:

> A time of terror, a time of shame, a time of
> shield-clashing, a time of axes, a time of blood,
> a time of fratricide,
> time of storms, time of wolves howls through the world!

The earth is stained with Balder's divine blood, which has congealed from the heavens. Thus summer vanishes from the lands forever, and Fimbulwinter, the violent winter, the last on earth, begins. Pale, the sun peeks through gray clouds, devoid of warmth and strength. Snowstorms howl ceaselessly, ice-hail rattles down. Then the leaves fall from the branches of the World Tree, and bare, it towers over the frost-stiffened cosmos.

And one day a storm roars through Yggdrasil's branches, so that the crown sinks low from the sky: the trunk creaks and trembles, and a crash resounds in the roots, as if the tree were falling.

Startled, Gold-comb, the rooster, raises his head from his wings at the head of the Sky-guardian: he shakes his wings, and his wake-up call rings out through the air.

Down in Thursenheim, Goldcomb's brother, Flamehead, stirs from his sleep: his cry soars through the valleys up to the peaks. And from beneath the earth, Nuthead calls out his reply from Hel's farmstead.

Heimdall, the guardian of the heavens, leaps to his feet; from his ash-tree bower he snatches the Gjallarhorn and blows it so that it echoes through all the worlds.

All doors and gates in Asgard fly open. Gods and heroes surge forth in a dense throng. From Wigrid, the battlefield before Valhalla's gate, they all storm forth in arms. There, on the vast plain of the heavens, Odin awaits them on horseback in his golden helmet, Gungnir, the spear, in his right hand. He arranges the surging multitudes into a battle wedge: the gods in the vanguard; the heroes of Valhalla and Volkwang, the countless ones, shield to shield behind them.

A dull roar rises from the depths. Thursenheim thunders. Loki's chains shatter in the rocky depths: he leaps from the rock and surges upward with a shrill battle cry. His fiery hair blazes upward, and behind him, the shaggy armies of the Thursen roll black through the chasms and over the glaciers toward the sky.

All around the earth, the world ocean roars in wild fury. Beyond the thundering waves, the Midgard Serpent darts: its glittering body winds high into the air, and its maw yawns toward the sky.

Far away at the end of the world, Leichenschwelg, the Storm-Eagle, beats his wings on the rocky isle: there the gate of the underworld springs open, and the army of the dead rolls forth from the depths. A mighty ship rocks on the shore, pale-yellow, as the moon's waxing disk glides from the night mists. The hordes of ghosts stream into the ship: Leichenschwelg pecks at the ropes with his beak, and the dead's vessel roars away... Abandoned in the underworld, Garm, the corpse-hound, rages at his chain: it snaps, and with a gentle bark he races after the dead.

The sun and moon in the sky turn pale. From dark clouds, Skoll and Hati, the wolves, rise up hissing and pounce upon the stars, pale with terror. Night falls in the skies.

Only Bifröst, the bridge of the heavens, still sparkles far away through the darkness. Then it blazes from the depths: a sea of flames surges—the sons of Fireheim on snorting steeds, Surt, the Scorcher, leading the way! The fiery host thunders across the bridge into the sky, and with a crash it collapses behind them in a heap.

The earth shudders and swallows the human race into its abysses. The dwarves lie trembling in their caves.

Then a whirring sound, as if the thread of life were snapping, rings through the cosmos: Gleipnir bursts asunder before the gates of Asenheim, Fenrir's fetter! In a mighty leap, the beast hurls itself at the army rolling toward it.

Wolf howls, giant roars!

The gods and heroes stand in close ranks before Asgard, facing the enemies: they shine like sunlight breaking through billowing storm clouds.

Hesitantly, the hordes of fiends surge and sway before them. Then, from the ranks of the monsters, crouched beneath the monstrous bristles, Fenrir creeps forth with glowing eyes. Howling, he rips open his maw, which yawns dark as the gates of death.

Odin drives his spurs into the horse's flanks and salutes his people one last time with his spear. He lowers Gungnir and hurls it at the howling beast—it knocks the horse to the ground, the Father of the World falls before the wolf, and the hordes charge at each other with a roar.

With one foot, Widar steps into the wolf's maw, rips open its jaws with his left hand, and thrusts his blade into its throat. Freyer fights the fire giant. Chest to chest, Heimdall and Loki lie, piercing one another. Gods, heroes, and monsters fall.

Then a piercing howl cuts through the din of battle: the Midgard Serpent raises its head. It spews venom and flames upon the gods.

Thor charges against the ancient foe: the thunder hammer whirs and shatters the serpent's head. But struck dead by the poisonous breath, Thor staggers nine paces backward and falls.

Surt's flames burst from the crown of the World Ash; in the conflagration, Asgard is consumed. The sky shatters and crashes down to earth with a roar. Hissing steam rises from the sea, and the universe sinks into the roaring waves.

Then all is still, and as in primeval times, only the clouds steam above the waters.

This is Ragnarök, the fall of the gods and the end of the world...

But one day, Erik, a breath blows across the waters: the mists disperse, mountain peaks rise from the flood, and once again the earth emerges in young green from the gray sea. Brighter even than the sun that sank, a new one shines, its child, from the sea, and once again the World Ash stretches and rustles in fresh foliage above the cosmos. From the cave

W c b c r, Gvllrrsnücn.

of the tribe below, two people step forth, Lif, light as the dawn of the world, Listhrasir, strong as the longing for life in the breathing breast: they slept in each other's arms under the tree's protection while the world perished in flames.

Above the earth, the heavenly meadow arches anew: in its grass shimmer the golden dice, long lost, with which the Aesir played in their joyful youth. Once again, as in primeval times, gods gather in Asgard, the children of the ancients, and the strength of their fathers flashes rejuvenated from their eyes: in the hand of Widar, the Avenger, Gungnir, Odin's spear of victory, sparkles; Modi and Magni, Thor's sons, swing his sacred hammer. A new heavenly home, Gimle the Hall of Gems, shines beneath the crown of the ash tree. There Balder rules the world, the guardian of justice: there the meadows are greener than ever, and the fields of the earth bear richer fruit. Reconciled with Höd, who was once blind, Balder sits at the feast, all his brothers restored around him and the hosts of heroes who fought in the Ragnarök. There they speak and whisper of the days of old and the mighty deeds of the ancestors. And beneath the ash tree sits Hönir, the Wise One, as in days of old, and he casts the branches of fate to show gods and men what is to come.

From the depths of the earth, Nidhögg, the dragon, emerges greedily, , his bloody fangs laden with the corpses of the wicked: he spreads his black wings wide, to roar toward the heavens, but, blinded by the radiance of Gimle, he sinks back into the depths."

Hakon was silent. The servants and maids sat quietly in the hall. Skeggi, the farmer, stroked his beard thoughtfully. The housewife drew a deep breath from her chest. But Erik, his cheeks flushed, took his uncle's hand and looked into his face with questioning eyes.

Then Chieftain Hakon raised his head.

"So sing our seers, Erik, and so it shall be.

Colorful and rich is life for him who looks

into the light. Victory is beautiful: like a deep drink, it refreshes and intoxicates after a fierce battle. Booty and wealth grant sovereign power. But booty, wealth, and sovereign power are not the highest good. Nor is victory the highest good. The highest good is to live bravely and die bravely. For in eternal change, all things transform. Even the gods pass away. But the divine remains."

S

The Race of the Gods.

The Aesir.

1.

Bur,
the builder

Bestla,
the daughter of the giant

Odin,
the Lord of the Heavens

Förd,
the Earth Mother

Frigg,
the Queen of the Aesir

Mle **We**

Grid,
the giantess

?

Thor,
the god of weather

Sif,
the clan-loving

Balder,
the Peacemaker

Tlanna,
the Chaste

Hermod, Höd,
the messenger of the gods of misfortune

Widar
the Avenger

Bragi
the singer

2dun,
the Lady of the Golden Apples

Thrud,
the mighty ones

Modi and INagni,
the boys

Born of the sea:

Heimdall,
the guardian of the heavens

Hymir,
the ice giant

The All-Golden

Tyr,
the Sword-Wielder

Loki,
the Blazing One

Sigyn,
the Faithful

Nari

Narfi

Groa,
the Mother of Green

The Vanir.

Tljörd, ...-.....
the sea god

His wife from primeval times

Skadi,
the daughter of the storm giant

Hönir,
the Seer

Freyer,
the bestower of blessings

Gerd,
the giantess

Freyja,
the Joyful

Vdd,
The Lost One

The Helpers of the Gods

1. Odin's Entourage

The Valkyries, the Odin's shield-maidens
The Einherjar, the heroes reborn in Valhalla.

2. Frigg's maidens

Gefjun, the Chaste Fulla,
the Keeper of the Chests
Gna, the Messenger
Hli n, the protector of mankind
Losn, the Intercessor

Snotra, the strict guardian of morals War, the guardian of oaths
Saga, the expert in song, Odin's friend.

3. Thor's servants

Thjafi, the nimble servant
Röskwa, the energetic maid.

4. Frey's servants

Skirnir, the Enlightener.

The Abodes of the Gods

Asgard—Asenheim, the realm of the Aesir
Valhalla, the Hall of Heroes Odin's
Fensalir, Frigg's Waldheim
Sökkwabek- Sturzbach, Sagas Seat
Thrudwang, the Realm of Power: Thor's Home
Himinbjörg, Heimdall's Heavenly Fortress
Home of the Light Elves, Frey's Realm
Dolkwang, Freyja's Realm
Midi, Widar's Pastureland
Fernenglanz, Balder's Castle
Noatun, Njörðr's Ship-Home Gimle, the Hall of Gems of the resurrected gods

Gods' Weapons and Gods' Possessions

Gungnir, Odin's spear Draupnir, his ring of dominion Mjölnir, the Malmer: Thor's hammer
Gjallar, the Golden Horn, Heimdall's
Skidbladnir, Frey's airship
Brisingamen, Freyja's necklace
The Falcon Shirt of
Freyja Odrörir, the drink of the gods.

Divine Beings

Nott, the Night
Dag, the Day
Mani, the Moon's Guide Winter, Windswals/
Sol, the Sun-Steerswoman
Summer, Swasudsl _

Divine Animals

Sludumla, the Heavenly Cow

Heidrun, the Heavenly Goat
Eikthyrnir, the Cloud Stag
Sleipnir, Odin's
Gulltopp — Goldbraid, Heimdall's
Golden Mane, Frey's
Swift-Hoof, Gnas's
Skinsaxi — Shimmering mane, Dag's Hrimfaxi
— Frost-mane, Notts
Arwakr — Early-Riser, Alswidr — Mighty-Strength,) °U"'
HllgiN i odln, R-d-n Munin/

i Odin, Wsil"

Freki/
Tanngrisnir, the Gnasher
Tanngnjost, the Cracker
G u l l i n b u rsti, Frey's golden-bristled boar
The cat team Frey-jas
Gullinkambi-)
GoldkaiNM I d!< «send-im Flainmenkopf f^"- in R'-'sndUm „
Soothead)

The Giants (also known as Thursen or Joten)

Ymir, the primordial giant, the Roarer
Bestla, the wife of the Aesir, the Binder: Ymir's daughter
Bergelmir — Bear Roar, his son
Ägir, the Roarer
Ran, his wife
Jörd, the Earth Mother's daughter
Grid, the Faithful) S«undinn,n
Farbauti — Beaten to Death, Loki's father
Angrboda, the Messenger, Loki's girlfriend
Gymir, the ice giant Gerd, his daughter
Thrym, the hammer thief, lord of the Thurses
Geirröd, the glacier giant Hymir, the ice sea giant Hrungnir, the mountain giant MLkkurkalfi — Mist-Wader, the clay giant Thjazi, the storm giant

Skadi, his daughter, Njörðr's wife
Wafthrudnir — Delusion, Odin's opponent in word-duels
Suttung, the robber of the Odroerir
B a u g i, the Old One, his brother the Giant Tree Master, the Rebuilder of Valhalla
Surt, the Black One, the ruler of the realm of fire, Muspelheim
Mimir, the water spirit

Urd N.n.n. d<«
Werdandi/ Daughters of d«, Fate, Skuld /
Swasud, the Father) of Summer I
Windswal, the s ' " father of winter)
Wala, the seer of the giants in the underworld
The Jotuns beyond the world

Fiends and Monsters

Leichenschwälg, the Storm Eagle
Nidhögg, the dragon of the underworld beneath the roots of the World Tree
Skoll's lair,
Hati)

»«-.»ng«

Hel, the goddess of death
Fenrir, the World Wolf
The Midgard Serpent

Dwarves

Alvis, the Prince of the Dwarves Sindri, the Slag Man Jwaldi and his sons Brokk, the "Badger".

Betting in Space

Asgard and Vanaheim^

Thursen or loten d°' heim

^o>en. Yggdr°si,
I

Helheim or Nebelheim i lotenheim beyond the world.
Muspellheim, the realm of fire.

BERSERKER
BOOKS